

Cambodia's hedging foreign policy between the United States and China: The role of domestic politics, 1999-2019

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Abstract

The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the apparent transition from the post-Cold War unipolarity to multipolarity of the twentieth-first century have resulted in a highly fluid geostrategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region, where signs of potential aggressors are not clear cut, and structural power among major states still unfolds with considerable uncertainty. This condition inclines small states such as Cambodia to reject traditional bandwagoning and balancing schools of thought that require them to choose a side between contesting big powers. Instead, they opt for a pragmatic foreign policy known as “hedging” by forging relations with multiple external players concurrently.

Through the lens of survival of authoritarian regimes, this qualitative study contends that Cambodia's general election cycle influences its hedging between the United States and the PRC from 1999 to 2019. On the one hand, Cambodia's economic and military relations with the United States remain stable and mature over time, whereas its political ties deteriorate temporarily during elections because of government repression. On the other hand, Cambodia's relations with China deepen without fluctuation regardless of electoral cycles. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to uphold the legitimacy of the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) by retaining the support of two key constituencies in Cambodian politics: the winning coalition and the opposition group.

This study concluded that Cambodia hedged by engaging not only with the United States and China but also with Japan, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in order to bolster economic growth, maintain internal stability, strengthen its armed forces, preserve the regional balance of power, and project an ambivalent image of its alignment posture. The thesis offers policy implications for the scholarship on the foreign policy of small autocratic states and the future of U.S. foreign policy in Asia.

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List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
FUNCINPEC	National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
HRP	Human Rights Party
PPA	Paris Peace Agreements
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
RCAF	Royal Cambodian Armed Forces
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
SRP	Sam Rainsy Party
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Since 1993, the Kingdom of Cambodia has implemented a pragmatic foreign policy known as “hedging.” The term is used here to describe a hybrid foreign policy of institutionalized engagement and limited alignment vis-à-vis one or more major powers. A hedger attempts to maximize economic and political returns with minimal security risks, to safeguard autonomy, to secure the incumbent’s domestic legitimacy, and to create a regional balance of power during a time of transition in the geopolitical order. The hedger employs counteracting effects within its foreign policy to project an ambiguous alignment posture. As a small underdeveloped state emerging from a sustained civil conflict, Cambodia has exercised this policy to avoid choosing a side between two competing powers, the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which are engaging in a strategic competition for influence in the Asia-Pacific region.¹

Although many small powers in Southeast Asia are hedging, Cambodia’s hedging has a pattern and characteristics distinct from those of the other countries. This thesis argues that Cambodia’s hedging between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019 has been influenced by its general election cycles in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Hun Sen of the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), the country hedges in order to preserve peace and domestic stability, to bolster economic growth, to maneuver through a fluid geopolitical landscape around its peripheries, and to retain the electoral support of pro-China and pro-U.S. domestic constituencies.

This study offers supporting evidence for the hypothesis that electoral cycles affect foreign policy choices made by the CPP government. Cambodia’s economic and military relations with

¹ The Asia-Pacific region includes states in Northeast Asia (China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Russia), Southeast Asia (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam), Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Peou 2010).

the United States remain stable and mature over time, whereas its political ties deteriorate during a general election because of government repression. Electoral cycles are associated with restrictions on the free press, civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and opposition parties by the government. Around an election year, Cambodia distances itself politically from the United States to secure the electoral outcome favored by the CPP. After the CPP wins, Cambodia rebalances its hedging by accommodating U.S. policy to repair any potential damage, usually by loosening control over domestic opposition and perpetuating the illusion of multiparty liberal democracy. In contrast, Cambodia's economic, political, and military relations with China are impervious to the political repression typical during elections. Sino-Cambodian ties have deepened gradually because both sides see one another as a willing partner offering international legitimacy without regard to the political system. Moreover, the ruling CPP needs China's backing around election time to offset U.S. influence, to rally its winning coalition, to secure the election, and to prolong its time in office.

The United States and China are not the only critical factors in Cambodia's hedging formula. To diversify its economic affairs and to reduce dependence on any one country, Cambodia trades with the European Union (EU), which is the largest collective consumer of its exports every year, accounting for over 40% of annual goods sold. To preserve its diplomatic autonomy and avoid external domination, the kingdom has engaged in a strategic partnership with Japan that it continues to develop, covering a wide range of bilateral engagements and coordination on economic, political, military, and security matters. Although Japan is one of several foreign countries with which Cambodia maintains diplomatic relations, it serves as a key balancing force against China, whose influence on the CPP has grown considerably in recent decades, and an extension of the Western community that does not criticize openly about the problems of human

rights and democracy. Last, Cambodia works concertedly with fellow members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to enmesh the United States and the PRC in regional norms, dialogues, and institutions to create a regional balance of power.

This study has three implications for U.S. policy toward small authoritarian states and in Asia. First, since regime survival plays a central role in foreign policy calculation of the CPP leaders, the United States should expect to see Phnom Penh² distance itself repeatedly from Washington around each general election, and it should view this decision as a temporary move made by the CPP elites to secure their power. Since the CPP leadership is highly sensitive to criticisms about human rights and democracy, the United States should tone down its rhetoric and, instead, further its engagement with Cambodia in order to foster mutual trust with government leaders, to shape choices of the Cambodian electorates, and to offset China's growing influence.

Second, Cambodia is and will continue to hedge into the future due to the characteristics of its internal political process and the uncertain strategic environment around its peripheries. As a weak state that was once subject to foreign interferences and went through a sustained period of civil war, Cambodia understands how grave a risk it is to choose an overt alignment with one foreign power and become a pawn on a geopolitical chessboard. The CPP government needs to engage with both the United States and China to preserve its domestic and international legitimacy. That said, it has to shifts its position between these powers during election time to prolong its power. The United States should voice its concerns more selectively and discreetly through private channels. Moreover, it should invigorate its formal or informal contacts with the CPP elites, especially the reform-minded second-generation cadres who will succeed the current party's leaders, because they will play key roles in formulating Cambodia's foreign policy in the future.

² Phnom Penh is the capital city of Cambodia.

Third, because Cambodia and other ASEAN members will continue to hedge between the United States and China, Washington should use this opportunity to support ASEAN's leadership roles in promoting a rules-based order in Southeast Asia, which opens the field to involvements of other Western powers and disincentivizes China from choosing a revisionist posture that may destabilize this region. That requires U.S. leaders to show up at key regional meetings led by ASEAN and to adopt a consistent policy aimed at fostering regional engagement through government-to-government and people-to-people diplomacy.

This thesis has four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework and outlines the research design. Chapter 2 briefly discusses Cambodia's history and its diplomatic relations with the United States and China from 1953 to 1998. Chapter 3 tests a hypothesis concerning the relationships between the independent variable, Cambodia's domestic politics (general election) and, the dependent variable, its hedging foreign policy between Washington and Beijing from 1999 to 2019. Chapter 4 summarizes key findings, discusses implications, and offers policy recommendations of the research.

The rest of this chapter introduces the theoretical foundation, the central hypothesis, and the research design of the study. It begins by surveying the literature on the survival of authoritarian regimes and hedging strategy as used by small powers in Southeast Asia.

1.1 Literature Review

This section surveys two bodies of political science literature. The first is on the survival of the authoritarian regime. It identifies the political dilemmas facing autocratic leaders and the tactics they use to deal with those dilemmas in order to stay in power. The second literature examines debates about the definition, rationale, and operationalization of the hedging strategy in the context of small states in Southeast Asia.

Together, these two bodies of literature form the theoretical bedrock of this thesis, which explains how Cambodia's domestic politics has affected its hedging foreign policy between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019.

Survival of Authoritarian Leaders

This section surveys the literature on what authoritarian leaders do to survive. There are two reasons why it is crucial to examine this subject. First, it helps us understand how Cambodia under Hun Sen has calculated cost-benefit analysis in its response to domestic constituents, a process that is fundamentally linked to its foreign policy of playing between the United States and China. Since the ruling CPP searches for external support, whether financial, political, or legitimization, from foreign partners in order to satisfy domestic constituents, exploring this practice as a matter of theory sheds light on how the Cambodian government uses foreign policy as a tool for its domestic agenda. Second, unlike established democracies in the West, Cambodia has an underdeveloped economy coupled with a relatively young and flawed democracy (Croissant 2018; Morgenbesser 2018; O'Neill 2017; Un 2011). Its foreign policy process is not transparent. However, when viewed closely, Cambodia's domestic politics is intrinsically linked with its external relations because internal stability, economic growth, and national autonomy all figure prominently in assuring the continuity of the CPP government. Therefore, observing domestic politics is one way to understand how the country navigates its way through the U.S.-China strategic competition today.

In his classic text about political trade-offs under autocracy, Ronald Wintrobe (1998) argues that no autocrat in this world can rule alone. They need a handful of loyal subordinates who follow their orders to implement policies, to oppress the public, or to take out a rogue member of their inner circle. One dilemma facing a dictator is that the more powerful he becomes, the less he

knows what his supporters and the public think of him because of their fear of speaking the truth. Furthermore, since political institutions under dictatorship tend to be highly partisan, flawed, and too weak to enforce the equal application of rules and regulations, physical retribution is a constant possibility. Thus, distrust between tyrants and the people they control is continuously present (Svolik 2012). To get around this dilemma, dictators depend on three tools: repression, co-optation, and legitimation.

First, repression entails the use of both violent and non-violent tactics to punish, intimidate, or discourage political dissenters. Although repression is useful, it is an expensive tactic that can backfire. To repress opponents, a leader needs a security apparatus such as the police and the army to plan, follow up, and orchestrate action. In return, the tyrant rewards his key supporters with excessive salaries, military rank, and political protection. This tactic, however, allows his close confidants such as powerful generals to know the regime's weaknesses, to further their bargaining position through increased power within the regime, and to plot against the leader. That is why a dictator needs co-optation as part of a formula to maintain power.

For co-optation to work, the dictator needs to provide his key followers more than what his opponents can, so that they remain loyal to him (Geddes 2004). Co-optation requires revenue streams from tax and non-tax sources. Tax revenues are collected from the public directly or indirectly, whereas non-tax revenues can be extracted from natural resources, offshore investment, or foreign aid. Although rents allow a dictator to keep supporters satisfied, co-opt opponents, and decrease the reliance on brute force, not every dictator is fortunate to have the resources necessary. Likewise, even though a dictator can raise tax rates to increase revenue, high taxes can provoke popular uprisings, primarily when levied on the middle class (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Meanwhile, non-tax revenues from foreign aid and trade are often subject to international sanctions

stemming from the dictator's repression in the first place. Besides financial largesse, a dictator can co-opt the opponent using political institutions. Gandhi and Prezeworski (2007) and Gandhi (2008) argue that political institutions are another effective co-optation tool because they enable leaders to rotate and broaden patronage resources among key followers and to co-opt potential opponents.

The third tool is legitimization, which refers here to the conduct of sham elections and the provision of public goods. First, although elections pose dangers to an autocrat's power, they also legitimize his rule and enable him to sustain the "patron-client exchange process" by rotating and propping up various factions among his key supporters by distributing various lucrative offices (Magaloni 2008; McCargo 2005; Morgenbesser 2017). Second, public goods provisions increase leaders' legitimacy. Unlike private goods, which are distributed from a leader to his inner circle, public goods provide benefits for everybody in a society. To survive in office, autocrats must carefully calculate a balance in their reliance on repression, co-optation, and legitimization to satisfy, deter, and control key local constituents. Moreover, the autocrats' domestic agenda must fit into broader foreign policy vis-à-vis major powers in order to prolong the incumbent's rule.

Hedging Strategy in Foreign Policy

The end of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in 1989 and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict, widely known as the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA), two years later paved the way for the end of the last civil war that had divided major powers and states in Southeast Asia for over two decades.

In the post-Cold War era, Southeast Asia has become one of the most stable and economically dynamic regions in the world. While people in the Middle East are fighting in armed conflicts fueled by sectarian division, terrorist activities, refugee crises, and the possible collapse of some states, people in Southeast Asia are spearheading a different reality, which is more

peaceful, stable, and prosperous. This region has become the center of gravity of global politics and economic growth in the twenty-first century. However, as Kurt Campbell (2016) aptly notes, hiding beneath the Asian economic miracle and prolonged peace is a quiet arms race, which seems to have accelerated over the past decade. Developed and underdeveloped states alike are acquiring newer and more advanced weaponry in response to the rise of China's military assertiveness in the South China Sea and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. One way to explain this contradictory reality is to study how small powers in this region manage their relationships with both China and the U.S., and how they navigate their ongoing strategic competition.

Although hedging has gained growing recognition as a logical theory to explain the international relations of small powers in Southeast Asia in the twenty-first century, this concept is still widely misunderstood and contested by political scientists and other experts alike. Hedging literature has become more prominent in the study of foreign policy because traditional schools of thought focused on balancing and bandwagoning have failed to explain how small powers have responded to relations between the United States and China and among the small powers and the big ones. First, the realist conception offered by Kenneth Waltz (1979) argues that states will balance against a dominant hegemon by siding with a secondary hegemon. This depiction does not capture the full geopolitical reality in Southeast Asia today. Although the United States has been and will continue to be the dominant regional player for years to come, small states have not sided with Beijing to balance against Washington.

Meanwhile, Stephen Walt (1990) poses the concept of balance of threat, positing that states side with a countervailing power to balance against a commonly identified threat. This argument also does not entirely explain the fact that Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam have not forged a formal military alliance with the United States to balance against the PRC, even though they feel

threatened by Beijing to a varying degree. Instead of forging alliances, these countries sustain a U.S. military presence by giving U.S. forces access to logistical bases, acquiring its arms, and by conducting joint military exercises.

Randall Schweller (1994) argues that bandwagoning with the rising power brings benefits and protection for small power. However, while Southeast Asian nations have enjoyed deepening economic ties with China, they have been concerned by its military power. They have been inviting the United States and middle powers such as Japan, India, Russia, and Australia to get involved in regional affairs and to act as potential offshore balancers. Moreover, due to historical sentiment against great-power domination, the region accommodates China's rise in the economic realm but keeps it at arm's length in the defense arena to safeguard their independence (Cho and Park 2013).

This absence of a clear-cut position of small states has given rise to hedging as a choice that seeks the middle course between the two schools of thought. Since balancing and bandwagoning require a state to choose one side over the other, Southeast Asian states in the post-Cold War era opt for a mixture of both in order to maximize returns and minimize security risk while the threat is not clear cut and structural shifting among big powers still unfolds with considerable uncertainty (Chung 2004; Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). There is still little consensus in the debate about hedging in two areas: definition of the term and the logic of its use.

Let us first turn to its definition. Four major conceptualizations of hedging have emerged in recent years. The first and most common one defines it as a mixed strategy that combines engagement and accommodation, on the one hand, with old-fashioned realist balancing, on the other (Feng 2013; Medeiros 2005; Roy 2005; Tunsjø 2017). States hedge to prevent geopolitical tension from turning into violent conflict by stressing economic ties and multilateral security. States feel threatened by a potential adversary even when the threat does not pose an immediate

danger, and reaction with overt military balancing at that time might only turn a perceived threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hiep 2013). Southeast Asia's hedging combines "low-intensity" military balancing with economic and diplomatic engagement with China and encourages continued U.S. diplomatic and military presence. Meanwhile, the regional institution such as ASEAN intends to become the principal intergovernmental body, which facilitates peaceful great-power-to-great-power relations as well as great-power-to-small power ties in the region, promoting peaceful dialogues, confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy among interested parties.

The second conceptualization is outlined by Evelyn Goh (2006, 2007), who defines hedging as an alternative strategy used by small states when they are bent on avoiding a choice between pure balancing or pure bandwagoning in its triangular relations between the United States and China. In this version, the hedgers combine indirect balancing and engagement to hedge. Although this conceptualization agrees with Roy (2005) and Feng (2013) that a hedger combines indirect balancing and engagement to keep all doors open, the argument attaches greater significance to the role of ASEAN and its multilateral platforms, which facilitate and promote economic and political interdependence, "a normative framework for regional security," and peaceful relations between all powers (Jackson 2014). In other words, small states bilaterally and multilaterally enmesh the United States and China with regional platforms led by ASEAN such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Their purposes are to deepen big powers' engagements and stakes in regional affairs, giving them a sense of obligation and membership in a rule-based, peaceful community of states.

The third conceptualization is expressed by John Ciorciari (2010), who argues that hedging is just another type of alignment. "Limited alignment," as he puts it, enables small states to

optimize security risks in their relations with one or more great powers because a formal alliance is too costly and too risky. Moreover, an alliance can lessen the autonomy of weaker states and drag them into an unwanted war for which they are not prepared to fight. On the other hand, genuine nonalignment or strict neutrality exposes small states to the risk of having no partner on which to rely. Therefore, all Southeast Asian countries adopted limited alignment with either the United States or China in the past four decades. Ciorciari (2019) defines hedging as a utility-maximizing and risk-management strategy that enables minor powers to seek non-alliance relations with big powers and to extract material benefits and protection at a low cost.

Since no one can predict what exactly the rise of China will do to the existing regional economic and security orders and how the United States' engagement will evolve, small states will choose to hedge. Material benefits such as foreign aid can bolster the incumbent governments, while endorsement from a great power can offer credibility in the international arena. Due to the non-binding characteristic of these bilateral ties, small states can obtain a varying level of security guarantee from the stronger partner at low risk of being abandoned or entrapped in an unreliable alliance. This model differs from the expectation set by Medeiros (2005), who argues that small powers hedge because they believe potential risk today will translate into a threat tomorrow (Ciorciari 2010, 2019; Ciorciari and Haacke 2019). Due to its positive economic expectation and lower perception of threat posed by big powers, small powers hedge by projecting an ambiguous signal about future alignment and by adopting pragmatic economic relations (Haacke 2019).

The fourth and most comprehensive conceptualization of hedging comes from Cheng-Chwee Kuik. Kuik (2008, 2016a, 2016b) defines hedging as a strategy, which combines return-maximization with risk-contingency policies to allow states to extract economic, diplomatic, and political benefits and to prepare for potential security risks vis-à-vis major powers when the

strategic environment remains highly uncertain. In contrast to the previous models, Kuik divides hedging into two clear-cut pillars, each of which consists of three sub-elements. The return-maximization pillar is composed of three policies: economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning. Likewise, the risk-contingency pillar consists of three policies: economic diversification, indirect balancing, and dominance denial. A state is identified as a hedger when it meets three conditions. First, it insists on not siding with one of the contending powers. Second, it concurrently adopts a mixed combination of the two pillars to create counteracting effects on its ambivalent position between great powers. Third, it uses these effects to reap gains and to prepare itself against potential security threats created by strategic uncertainty. Hedging is not only an alternative foreign policy model. It also serves the domestic legitimacy of the ruling elites (Kuik 2008).

Although different in some ways, these four models of hedging all agree with three respects. First, hedging enables small states to maximize returns in economic, security, and political dealings with great powers. Second, hedging creates maneuverability for small states when the power structure among major states is in a transitional period and when an immediate threat is not clear cut. Third, hedging combines accommodation and balancing behaviors. The next section discusses the rationale behind Phnom Penh's hedging between Washington and Beijing.

Why Does Cambodia Hedge?

Three strategic conditions incline Cambodia to adopt hedging as its foreign policy between the United States and China: opportunity, risk, and uncertainty. After World War II ended, the preeminent status of the United States and the Soviet Union created a bipolar system that pressured small states to take a side along the ideological line. Because they perceived a clear threat from communist China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand balanced against Beijing by aligning with

Washington. In contrast, Cambodia, which became independent in late 1953 and wanted to steer clear of Cold War politics, opted for neutrality, even though this effort succeeded for just a brief period before failing due to geopolitical hyperpolarization and interferences by foreign powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent end of the Cold War in 1991, the bipolarity system yielded to unipolarity because the United States emerged as the only global hegemon. In this situation, Cambodia and other small states saw more benefits in either aligning with the dominant player or not balancing against it.

The global financial crisis in 2008 and the rise of China in the twenty-first century, however, pose the most critical challenge to U.S.-dominated unipolar system for the first time since the Cold War ended. Some would interpret these developments along the lines of Organski and Kugler's (1980), using the power transition paradigm that takes conflict among great power to be inevitable. This thesis, however, argues that the post-Cold War unipolarity in the Asia-Pacific has been gradually shifting back to Cold War bipolarity, wherein Beijing represents one side and Washington represents the other. Meanwhile, middle powers such as Japan, India, Russia, and Australia are still considered as middle powers that are arguably behind the United States and China in either economic or military dimensions or both. Beijing is catching up and closing the gap with Washington in many aspects of global power, and at the same time, the latter's technological and military prestige in Asia has been waning (Allison 2020; Heginbotham et al. 2015; Lee 2018; Townshend et al. 2019; Yoshihara and Holmes 2018). Though this transition is at an early stage, it has created a strategic dilemma for small powers in Southeast Asia that are trying to position themselves between the contending powers. The ongoing U.S.-China strategic competition is different from the Cold War competition because today's world is much more economically intertwined and interdependent. A direct militarized conflict between these major

powers is highly unlikely not because of fear for total annihilation caused by nuclear weapons, but because war will undoubtedly lead to mutually assured economic destruction for both sides.

The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Subic Naval Base in the Philippines in 1992, the rise of China, and the emergence of militarily active middle powers including Japan, India, and Australia have created uncertainties about the regional security structure and potential sources of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. For these reasons, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has hedged by forging economic ties with Beijing and by accommodating it on sensitive political issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. This bandwagoning boosts bilateral trade, foreign aid, and investment, all of which help the CPP government maintain economic growth. Moreover, this accommodation of China's interests serves Cambodia's strategic and geopolitical purposes, offsetting threats posed by its immediate neighbors such as Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Global War on Terror in the early 2000s opened up a new frontier for U.S.-Cambodian engagement, especially after the Bali terror attack in 2002 by the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) terrorist network. To accommodate Washington, the RGC arrested suspects linked to the JI group and destroyed 233 Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles with assistance from U.S. officials (Thayer 2012). As a result, the Bush administration lifted the ban on bilateral aid to Cambodia and paved the way for a defense exchange program, the provision of financial and technical support, the docking of U.S. Navy ships, and joint military exercises. President Barack Obama's "pivot" to Asia in the early 2010s created a new opportunity for bilateral and multilateral engagement with Washington (Clinton 2011). Besides, Cambodia has maintained strong economic ties with the United States, which has been its single largest export market. Furthermore, the United States is a reliable provider on issues such as human rights, democracy, public health, cultural

preservation, and education. The Trump administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy places ASEAN at the center of U.S. strategic interests in Asia and opens up new opportunities for Phnom Penh to invigorate political ties with Washington (Poling 2019). The collision between the rise of China and the United States' volatile engagement in Asia creates sensible economic, security, and diplomatic reasons for Cambodia to adopt hedging.

That said, their competition presents Cambodia with risks. First, there is the risk of being trapped in the middle of the strategic contest between the United States and China. On the one hand, getting close to the PRC may lead to adverse domestic and foreign policy implications. The memory of Chinese support for the Khmer Rouge is alive and well among the population. An influx of Chinese investments and immigrants has stoked corruption, domestic crimes, and concern about negative impacts of China's activities in Cambodia (Ellis-Petersen 2018; Hul 2018b; Khidhir 2019; Nachemson and Kong 2019; Taing 2018; Wright 2018). Externally, bandwagoning with China may jeopardize Cambodia's relations with its former patron, Vietnam, which is a claimant to rights in the South China Sea maritime dispute. Its relationships with fellow ASEAN states and economic partners such as Japan, South Korea, the United States, and the EU will also be impacted.

On a similar note, it is politically challenging for Cambodia to be close to the United States. First, the two governments have had difficult diplomatic relations due to disagreement over democracy and human rights. Second, even though the United States is Cambodia's single largest export market, China is the biggest lender, donor, investor, and political backer of the CPP. Furthermore, controversial legacies such as Washington's alleged involvement in the 1970 coup d'état that ousted then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk and plunged Cambodia into the Vietnam War, support for the Lon Nol regime, the bombing of Cambodia (1969-1973), and support for the isolation of the Vietnam-backed regime in the 1980s have sown deep mistrust between both sides.

The third condition that incentivizes Cambodia to hedge is uncertainty, which refers to the unpredictable military and political postures of China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific. First, although Beijing has been building up its military, Phnom Penh does not see it as a direct threat because they do not share immediate borders. Inconsistencies in U.S. policy in Asia is another factor. Although President Obama's "pivot" to Asia in the early 2010s excited regional expectation for a brief period, that effort slowly retreated due to preoccupations with the Arab Spring and looming political gridlock at home. President Trump's "America First" rhetoric, his transactional view of international diplomacy, his apparent lack of interest in Asia, and his unilateral withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) all demonstrate that bandwagoning with the United States can be hazardous for Cambodia.

At the same time, alignment with Beijing against Washington is also counterproductive because there is no apparent reason to foresee U.S.-Cambodian conflict soon. Although government-to-government ties have strained over the issues of democracy and human rights, disagreements have not spilled into the economic realm. Two-way trade between the two countries grew significantly amid a deterioration in political ties. Furthermore, Cambodia cannot risk losing access to the U.S. export market, for it would impact the local textile and footwear industries that employ more than one million workers, many of whom are the ruling CPP's rural constituents. These exports constituted 26% of its total export in 2019 (Ean 2019). There is also a legal basis in Cambodia's 1993 constitution, which dictates that the country's foreign policy is to be "permanent neutrality and non-alignment." Last but not least, although the United States and China are competing in a strategic contest, it is uncertain whether this will turn into a confrontation like the Cold War. Since geopolitical and strategic environment around its peripheries remains fluid and that there is no apparent threat, Cambodia is better off keeping some distance from both powers.

A recent survey by the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute shows that 49.6% of Southeast Asians are worried about growing military tensions in the region, while 73.2% think ASEAN is turning into an area of great-power competition (Mun et al. 2020). The same poll indicates that 77% of people see a decrease in the level of regional engagement by the U.S. under President Donald J. Trump compared to President Barack Obama's administration. Only 34.9% view the United States as a reliable strategic partner. Even though 79.2% and 52.2% of respondents see the PRC as the most influential economic and strategic power in Southeast Asia, respectively, perception about China has met with skepticism as 38.2% believe that it will become a revisionist power aiming to establish a sphere of influence in the region. This poll illustrates that the general public in Southeast Asia is mostly aware of the current geopolitical landscape and is becoming increasingly worried that existing conditions will worsen in the coming years because of the U.S.-China competition. Instead of choosing a side, 48% of people living in ASEAN countries prefer that this regional organization improve its internal resilience and unity in order to cope with the geopolitical contest between these two major powers. Due to each country's internal challenges, pessimism about China's military intention, waning confidence in U.S. engagement, and distrust toward great powers caused by post-colonial nationalism, it is logical that Southeast Asian states are engaging both Washington and Beijing simultaneously by hedging.

1.2 Hedging Foreign Policy and Cambodian Domestic Politics

This thesis defines hedging as a hybrid foreign policy of institutionalized engagement and limited alignment vis-à-vis one or multiple major powers, which enables a small state to maximize economic and political returns with minimal security risks, to safeguard its autonomy, to secure the incumbent regime's domestic legitimacy, and to create a regional balance of power within a

transitional world order. It is hybrid in the sense that it is neither pure-balancing nor pure-bandwagoning.

Before proceeding to the hypothesis, we need to look at the operationalization of the hedging strategy. This study adopts the model proposed by Kuik (2016a) because the explanations it offers are the most detailed. The key to the implementation of hedging is to adopt a mixture of sub-elements from both return-maximization and risk-contingency in order to project an image of not choosing a side with any power. The return-maximization pillar puts a state into a close relationship with a major power for positive economic, political, and diplomatic benefits. In contrast, the risk-contingency pillar keeps some distance between the hedger and that very same power in order to minimize security risks. Hedgers need to concurrently implement these behaviors so that their effects balanced against one another.

Figure 1.1 on the following page shows that hedging consists of two policy prongs, each of which consists of three sub-elements. The return-maximization prong consists of economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning. Economic pragmatism means that a state builds economic ties with major powers to reap tangible benefits through trade, investment, and aid. Binding engagement is shown when a small state diplomatically engages external powers at bilateral and multilateral levels. Bilaterally, the smaller state establishes formal diplomatic relations. Multilaterally, small powers act concertedly through a regional organization such as ASEAN to enmesh big powers in existing norms, dialogues, and practices in order to create and maintain a balance of power. Limited bandwagoning dictates that the hedger defers to a major power on selective policies in exchange for warm political relations.

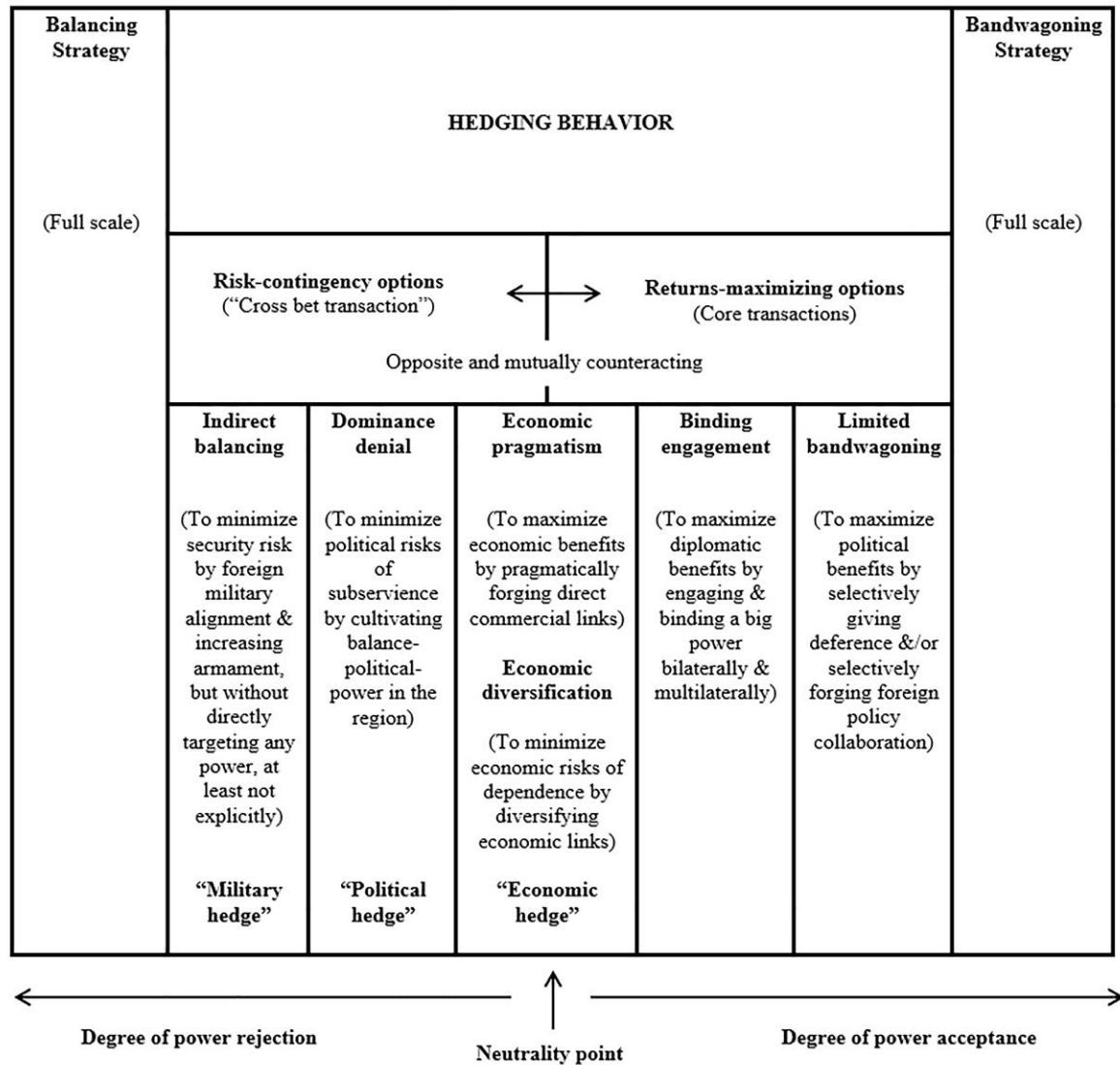


Figure 1.1 Spectrum of Power Rejection/Acceptance in Hedging (*Source: Kuik 2016a*)

The risk-contingency prong also consists of three sub-elements. Economic diversification means that the hedger expands its economic relations with many states in order to reduce economic dependency on any one of them. Dominance denial aims to prevent the emergence of hegemonic domination on the hedger's foreign policy and on the region in which it is located. Dominance denial and binding engagement are two sides of the same coin. Hedgers implement them bilaterally and multilaterally. In the context of Southeast Asia, efforts to prevent great-power dominance go

beyond the enmeshment of the United States and China in regional affairs. States in the region also bilaterally engage middle-level powers such as India, Japan, Russia, South Korea, Australia, and the EU and enmesh them with ASEAN-led platforms. The last element is indirect balancing, which means that a state implements internal and external military balancing. Internally, it moderately upgrades its armed forces without identifying who potential aggressors are. Externally, it forges non-alliance defense relations with more than one power to enhance bilateral cooperation, to extract resources, to improve its self-defense, and to send an ambiguous signal of its alignment posture. A hedger does not have to implement all six elements at once. Over time, it may incorporate different combinations of hedging sub-elements based on internal and external conditions. That said, the hedger must incorporate at least one element from both return-maximization and risk-contingency.

Kuik (2008, 2015) argues that hedging serves a domestic purpose because it enables incumbent leaders to justify and maintain the principal sources of their legitimacy. Analyzing them through the framework of regime legitimation (RL) shows that leaders of Southeast Asian states adopt hedging to mitigate security, political, and economic risks affecting their internal capacity to rule, to prioritize risks based on the foundation of their political authority at a given time, and to preserve domestic cohesion and deliver economic growth for the population. For example, maintaining economic growth and political stability are the core aspects of the CPP's legitimacy. That is why the primary objective of Cambodia's hedging vis-à-vis the United States and the PRC is the maximization of diplomatic and economic benefits with a low emphasis on the military dimension. Economic relations with China help the RGC develop physical infrastructures, create jobs, foster commercial activities, and produce economic rents for the ruling elites. In the meantime, however, Cambodia needs ties with the United States to maintain access to its consumer

market; to appeal to urban voters; to address social issues such as corruption, civil society, democracy, environment, labor rights, and education; and to maintain good ties with other Western powers, which are key economic players in the country. Meanwhile, Cambodia moderately acquires news arms and forges defense relations with both China and the United States to strengthen the abilities of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). Threats from neighbors and geopolitics of Asia are driving forces of this policy.

There are two domestic constituencies in Cambodia that hold opposing preferences in foreign policy but whose support the CPP needs to keep power. The first constituent is the CPP's winning coalition, which is pro-China. It includes the CPP oligarchs, RGC ministers and lawmakers, heads of armed forces and security, and low-income rural voters. The second constituent is the "opposition group," which is pro-U.S. It counts millennials, urban middle-class households, textile and garment factory workers, and opposition parties such as the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), Human Rights Party (HRP), and Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) as its members. This group is more outspoken than the CPP's rural base, and it supports Western-style democracy. To be clear, the "opposition group" here does not refer to opposition parties, but four pro-U.S. groups of voters taken collectively. Chapter 3 will discuss this in more detail.

What specific domestic political conditions affect Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China? This thesis contends that Cambodia shifts its position between the two powers during each general election cycle because the ruling CPP government calculates the costs, benefits, opportunities, and challenges imposed upon it by domestic demands and by external forces. Since economic development, internal stability, and protection against external security threats are core pillars of its legitimacy, and the party needs to engage both the United States and China to remain in power.

Since 1993, Cambodia has benefited immensely from foreign aid, foreign direct investment (FDI), and trade with the United States and China. Although the two powers dominate different sectors of Cambodia's economy and that they have competing strategic interests, both have played a vital role in fostering and maintain economic growth and internal stability. In order to maintain domestic legitimacy, the RGC must maintain strong and pragmatic economic ties with both Beijing and Washington to keep voters satisfied. At the same time, it also maintains commercial ties with fellow ASEAN members and others. The logic behind economic diversification is straightforward. If its relations with the United States or China go south, Cambodia may offset such calamities if it has diversified its economic portfolio. Furthermore, it is logical that more economic partners mean more jobs created, more FDI poured into the country, higher income for the people, and an overall growing economy. To these ends, Cambodia always incorporates economic pragmatism into its hedging, which does not fluctuate during election season. This sub-element remains stable and matures over time.

At the same time, Cambodia implements dominance denial and binding engagement bilaterally and multilaterally. Similar to its practice of economic diversification, the country engages in bilateral relations not only with the United States and China but also with Japan, the EU, ASEAN members, and others to balance external influences on its foreign policy, thereby avoiding becoming dependent on any foreign power. Multilaterally, Cambodia works in a concerted effort with fellow Southeast Asia countries to invite and enmesh external powers with regional norms, practices, and dialogues through ASEAN. The primary goal of dominance denial and binding engagement is to foster and maintain the balance of power on the hedger's foreign policy and on the region in which it is situated.

As a small country wedged between bigger neighbors, a strong emphasis on indirect balancing can be risky for Cambodia since it may escalate the security dilemma in a region where an arms race is already accelerating (Abuza 2020). Also, it is economically unwise for a developing country to invest too many resources on weapons acquisition when the resources could be invested more productively in education or physical infrastructure. That, however, does not mean that Cambodia ultimately reneges on building its military capability. To implement indirect balancing, Cambodia concurrently maintains non-alliance military ties with the United States and with China in order to extract logistical and technical assistance used to modernize and professionalize the RCAF and to project an ambivalent image of its alignment posture since geopolitical circumstances remain highly fluid. At the same time, in moderation, it acquires new arms for self-defense purposes to prepare for possible aggression without actually identifying who the potential aggressors are. Much like the four sub-elements discussed earlier, internal balancing is less vulnerable to the election cycle because it is oriented more toward changes in the external security structure rather than in domestic political affairs.

Finally, limited bandwagoning plays a role as well. Limited bandwagoning enables a small power to benefit from political relations with big powers without compromising its autonomy. By giving selective policy deference, the country can maneuver away from having to choose a side and adjust its strategic alignment from time to time based on domestic politics. Political deference can come in the adoption of a foreign policy favorable to a foreign power or, quite differently, as an implementation of a domestic policy encouraged by that power. For instance, since the early 2000s, Cambodia has accommodated both the United States and the PRC on different sets of issues. On the one hand, it cooperated with the War on Terror and the “pivot” to Asia through various regional initiatives led by the U.S., among which are cooperation among law enforcement

agencies, the Peace Corps program, and educational and cultural exchanges. Piecemeal implementation of reform at home is another way Cambodia does to appease the United States. On the other hand, the kingdom is one of the strictest enforcers of the “One China” policy, and it stands firmly with Beijing regarding the maritime dispute over the South China Sea. It also accommodates Chinese investments and immigrants who seek business opportunities in its territory, even if they have created negative impacts on the local population.

What differentiates Cambodia’s limited bandwagoning from the other five sub-elements of hedging is that Cambodia’s degree of accommodation with the United States and the PRC operates at a different level of deference during each general election. Therefore, we must clearly distinguish two patterns of bandwagoning here. Phnom Penh’s accommodation with Beijing is practically immune to its own domestic politics, and it strengthens over time because both sides are willing to work for mutually beneficial relations. In contrast, its political relations with Washington are very likely to deteriorate during the electoral cycle because of the CPP’s restrictions on human rights and democracy at home. In normal circumstances, Cambodia tends to balance its ties between both powers, even though engagement with China is closer by default due to the United States’ criticisms of Cambodia’s human rights records. When the CPP begins clamping down on opposition groups during electoral season, Cambodia retains strong ties or even leans politically closer to China. At the same time, it distances itself from the United States to secure Chinese endorsement; to rally the winning coalition; to insulate itself from Western pressure so that international costs for local suppression are low; and to safeguard the status quo. Once the CPP wins the election, Cambodia rebalances its hedging by mending political relations with the United States by loosening its grip on domestic opposition parties and toning down anti-Washington rhetoric.

To summarize, there are two patterns in Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019. Economic pragmatism, economic diversification, binding engagement, dominance denial, and indirect balancing are implemented continuously by the RGC, and they are not likely to fluctuate during each election cycle due to various reasons discussed above. Meanwhile, Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with the United States experiences fluctuation around election time due to the deterioration of democracy and human rights at home, but its relations with China remain stable and matures. That is because the CPP government tries to insulate itself from Western pressure and cracks down on domestic opposition to prolong its time in office through authoritarian tactics. Therefore, this thesis proposes the following hypothesis:

- **Hypothesis 1:** From 1999 to 2019, Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China experienced a stable degree of economic pragmatism, economic diversification, binding engagement, dominance denial, and indirect balancing but a high degree of fluctuation of limited bandwagoning with Washington during each general election cycle.

Figure 1.2 on page 26 indicates the operational framework of Cambodia's hedging foreign policy. From left to right, we first see the winning coalition and the opposition group, each of which consists of four groups of demographics. Both influence the way that the Cambodian government implements its hedging between the United States and China. In order to satisfy these two domestic constituencies and to remain in power, the CPP government needs to exercise a different degree of hedging-sub-elements during general elections, as discussed above.

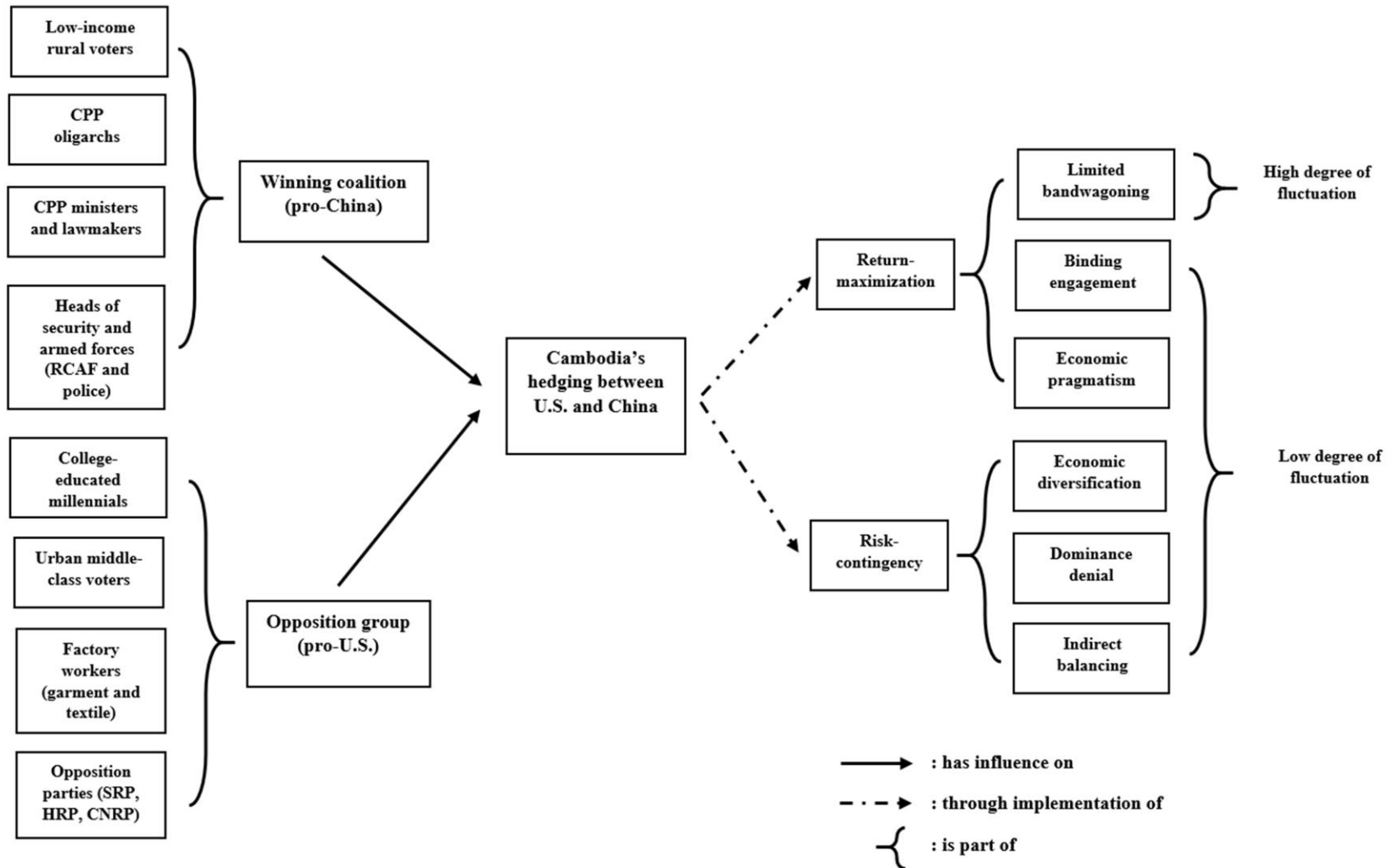


Figure 1.2 Analytical Framework of Cambodia's Hedging (Source: Author)

1.3 Research Objective and Key Definition

This thesis examines the causal relationship between the independent variable, Cambodia's domestic politics, and the dependent variable, its hedging between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019. It traces how the kingdom's relations with these two powers evolved during each general election in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018.

Between 1999 and 2019, Cambodia was an authoritarian country. There was full adult suffrage, and there was no nonelected authority (military, monarch, or religious) exercising control over the RGC. Nevertheless, Cambodian elections were neither free nor fair to groups outside of the CPP. In addition, the government placed restrictions on civil liberties (Dahl 1971; Diamond 1999; Huntington 1991; Schmitter and Karl 1991; Schumpeter 1976). However, what specific category of authoritarianism has Cambodia maintained? From 1999 to November 2017, the country was “competitive authoritarianism,” which refers to a government ruled by a civilian autocrat who abuses state resources to manipulate election outcomes in his favor (Levitsky and Way 2010). Although opposition parties such as SRP, HRP, and CNRP were able to compete for elected office, they had fair access to neither finance nor media coverage. Also, the CPP used its connection with the state to intimidate political opponents. After the CNRP was dissolved in late 2017, Cambodia became a *de facto* one-party state or a “closed autocracy,” as Levitsky and Way (2020) put it. Since then, Hun Sen has had practically unchecked executive and legislative powers on domestic and foreign policy.

1.4 Research Methodology, Scope, Data, and Significance

This thesis is a qualitative study, and it uses the process-tracing research methodology to analyze Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China. Some scholars define process tracing (PT) as a method used to explain the chain of processes and a causal mechanism, which

links independent variable X to dependent variable Y in a given situation (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Checkel 2005; George and Bennett 2005). Meanwhile, others define process tracing as a systematic examination of demonstrative evidence to support a given hypothesis or to contradict alternative hypotheses in a case study (Bennett 2010; Collier 2011; Ricks and Liu 2018). As Mahoney (2012) points out, PT helps a researcher explain the hypothesis of interaction that occurred between a cause and an outcome of that cause.

The scope of this study begins with 1999, which marks the early return of Hun Sen to the sole premiership of Cambodia following a power struggle in 1997 between the CPP and FUNCINPEC.³ The year also marks the country's admission into ASEAN as its tenth member. The year 2019 closes the study because it marks the first time since 1993 that Cambodia was transformed into a *de facto* one-party state following the general election in July 2018.

As a qualitative study, this study relies mainly on secondary sources such as academic journals, books, book chapters, and think-tank studies to develop an understanding of the theoretical framework of hedging. Also, this thesis surveys expert commentaries, analyses, and news reports in the local and international press to trace the development of Cambodia's domestic politics and foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States and the PRC between 1999 and 2019.

This study makes three significant contributions. First, it fills a gap in the literature about the diplomacy of small authoritarian states in Southeast Asia. This study is among the few existing pieces of research conducted on Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China. Second, existing studies claim that Cambodia is China's vassal state without carefully studying its complicated history, internal political process, and strategic dilemmas as a small state. This thesis carefully investigates how Cambodia's domestic politics affect its foreign policy between Beijing

³ Hun Sen initially served as Cambodia's prime minister under the Vietnam-backed regime from 1985 to 1993.

and Washington, which is closely linked to the survival of the CPP government under Hun Sen. It suggests the rationality of Cambodia's pragmatic foreign policy by viewing it as a contested territory between the winning coalition and the opposition group, which have opposing preferences and whose support the CPP needs to stay in power. Third, small powers in Southeast Asia will continue to play prominent roles in shaping great-power relations between the U.S. and China in the 21st century. As attention among scholars has gradually shifted away from Europe and the Middle East, this study sheds light on the future of security structure in the Asia-Pacific region.

The task at hand, then, is to analyze Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019 by looking at domestic political developments taking place before and after the general elections in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018. However, before we delve deeper into the empirical analysis, we must first study how the country has evolved since it became independent in 1953. That is the main subject of Chapter 2 to which we now turn.

Chapter 2 - A History of Cambodia: From Independence to the Post-Cold War Era

To understand the multi-faceted internal and external factors shaping the Kingdom of Cambodia's foreign policy today, Chapter 2 provides a historical background of the country's domestic politics and foreign relations with the United States and China from 1953 to 1998.

2.1 Norodom Sihanouk's Neutrality, 1953-1965

As a small and weak state, Cambodia had been subject to political interference and territorial subjugation by Thailand and Vietnam since the Khmer Empire, which once ruled over most of today's mainland Southeast Asia, collapsed in the 15th century. In 1853, King Ang Duong of Cambodia asked France for status as a French protectorate, hoping to save his country from its neighbors. However, his request was to no avail (Smith 1965). It was under the reign of Ang Duong's son and successor, King Norodom, that the country came under the French protectorate and then colonization until 1953.

After his grandfather King Sisowath Monivong died in 1941, Norodom Sihanouk, an 18-year-old prince at the time, was tapped by the French colonial officials to be the new king of Cambodia because they thought he would be apolitical. The decision, however, was a mistake. Sihanouk eventually stood up and, in the early 1950s, demanded Cambodia's autonomy back from France. During his diplomatic crusade in Western capitals in early 1953, Sihanouk stopped in Washington D.C. to meet with then-Vice President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to convince them of his cause (Leifer 1967). The American leaders rejected his plea, arguing that solidarity with France was crucial in dealing with communism. Disappointed by their "cold reception" and "ignorance," Sihanouk continued his Royal Crusade for Independence until

France granted complete autonomy to Cambodia on November 9, 1953 (Rust 2016). Since then, that day has been celebrated as national Independence Day by the Cambodian.

At the end of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina, Cambodia once again found itself dealing with the same security threats as in pre-colonial days, encroachment by Thailand and Vietnam. King Norodom Sihanouk realized that he had to attach its survival and independence to the interests of the major powers in order to preserve Cambodia's sovereignty. That was when neutrality became an appealing foreign policy for the young monarch (Gordon 1965). Geopolitical factors strongly shaped Sihanouk's appetite for neutrality. Although he had a greater fear of North Vietnam and China than of the United States, siding with either one of them would open his country up to Cold War politics that had already enflamed Laos and Vietnam (Pradhan 1987). Therefore, neutrality, as Sihanouk saw it, was a "geopolitical necessity" for Cambodia (Leifer 1967). The economic incentive was also a factor in this decision because the Cambodian economy was in poor shape. Neutrality also served domestic political purposes. To deter the Democratic Party from winning the 1955 election, the King abdicated the throne in favor of his father and ran the vastly popular *Sangkum Reastre Niyum* (Popular Socialist Community) movement, which galvanized political capital for his neutrality. The decision propelled him to a victory and cemented his grip over Cambodia's foreign policy.

The primary purpose of Cambodia's neutrality at that time was to draw a balance of influence between two countervailing powers, the United States and the PRC, in order to offset threats posed by pro-East North Vietnam, on the one hand, and pro-West Thailand and South Vietnam, on the other.⁴ That way, Cambodia could avoid taking a side when it remained

⁴ Although the Soviet Union was the leader of the socialist camp, the PRC figured more prominently in Cambodia's neutrality because it rallied with other developing nations of the Non-Aligned Movement. China's closer proximity to Cambodia and its attentive attitude to Sihanouk's cause also played a role.

geopolitically feasible. Cambodia achieved a strategic balance between East and West at the end of the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, when it secured both the American and Chinese commitment to guarantee its neutral position (Leifer 1967). With Washington, Phnom Penh entered into a military agreement in May 1955, which led to the establishment of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and paved the way for provisions of assistance for its armed forces (Rust 2016).

With Beijing, Sihanouk obtained Chinese commitment to Cambodia's neutrality by declaring that successful implementation of the five principles of peaceful co-existence or *Pancha Shila* by small states depended on the self-restraint of communist powers such as the Soviet Union, the PRC, and North Vietnam.⁵ His remarks put pressure on the North Vietnamese and Chinese delegations, who tried to ensure him of their peaceful intent.⁶ In exchange, Sihanouk promised Zhou Enlai, who headed the Chinese delegations, that Cambodia would not be part of the U.S.-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) (Richardson 2010). The logic behind his commitment was twofold. First, as long as the socialist camp remained friendly to Phnom Penh, joining SEATO would be an unnecessary provocation. Second, since SEATO's protocol automatically extended its protection to Cambodia despite its non-membership, there was no need for Phnom Penh to side with the West publicly.

Neutrality was a pragmatic response to geopolitical uncertainty in Southeast Asia. It maximized Cambodia's maneuverability between the two opposing sides of the Cold War. In its default mode, Cambodia befriends all nations regardless of their ideology and readjusts its position

⁵ According to Sophie Richardson (2010), the five principles of *Pancha Shila* consist of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, nonaggression, noninterference in others' internal affairs, and equality and mutual benefits.

⁶ North Vietnam and China gave their assurance to Norodom Sihanouk because they wanted to show the world that they were peaceful communist countries.

from time to time based on the direction of emerging security threats. When Cambodia identifies an aggressor, it adopts a provisional accommodation with the opposing power for protection and returns to its default mode after the threat disappears. Cambodian neutrality placed the United States on one side as a balance against North Vietnam and the PRC, and it counted China on the other as a balance against Thailand, South Vietnam, and, possibly, the United States. Laos was the third component of Cambodia's neutrality, which served as a physical buffer separating Phnom Penh from Beijing and Hanoi. As long as Laos remained neutral, Cambodia would not have direct contact with the communist.

China was the communist country most proactive in its support of Cambodia's neutrality. First, China was an essential economic donor, making its first grant in aid to a non-communist country, which amounted to \$22.4 million in 1956 (Leifer 1967). However, it was Beijing's political support that won over Norodom Sihanouk because it was something he could never receive from the United States (Richardson 2010). The PRC upheld Sihanouk's neutrality and stood in solidarity when Thailand and South Vietnam militarily threatened his government.

The principal problem with neutrality was that Cambodia never received the same endorsement from the United States, Thailand, and Vietnam. First, Cambodia's ties with Thailand strained due to a disputed control of the Preah Vihear temple and due to Bangkok's support for the Khmer Serei, an anti-monarchy clandestine group led by Norodom Sihanouk's chief nemesis, Son Ngoc Thanh. Meanwhile, cross-border raids by South Vietnamese troops, disputed control of islands in the Gulf of Thailand, and insults between Sihanouk and Ngo Dinh Diem stirred constant bilateral political and military contention. Cambodia's ties with the United States had also never been easy. Sihanouk's perception of Washington tainted during his early encounter with then-Vice President Nixon and Secretary of State Dulles (Clymer 2007).

Since the establishment of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Cambodia in 1950, U.S. officials had had difficulties dealing with Sihanouk due to his sensitivity and his colorful character, along with occasional ignorance on their part. Disparaging comments made against Sihanouk in the U.S. press were another cause for the endless diplomatic firestorm. Besides from that, two other factors sowed deep distrust between them. The first one was the unwillingness and inability of the United States government to restrain Thailand and South Vietnam and to keep them from threatening Cambodia. The second cause was a series of alleged plots against Norodom Sihanouk's government with links to Thailand, South Vietnam, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The most infamous of them was the Dap Chhuon plot, which was a failed attempt to declare a secessionist region in northern Cambodia led by Sihanouk's disgraced military commander, Dap Chhuon. Chhuon had connections with the South Vietnamese intelligence and with a CIA member named Victor Matsui, who was stationed in Phnom Penh (Rust 2016). Sihanouk became "permanently distrustful" of the United States after the Dap Chhuon plot (Chandler 1993).

Despite tension with Thailand, South Vietnam, and the U.S., neutrality was a considerable success for Cambodia between 1953 and 1965 (Pradhan 1987). While Vietnam and Laos had engulfed in a civil war, Cambodia had maintained its independence and internal stability, and it had minimized the effects on it from neighboring wars. Foreign aid from more than a dozen countries contributed to the developments of physical infrastructures, education, and healthcare. Meanwhile, Sihanouk's high popularity among voters enabled him to cope with factional fighting at home, namely, in the National Assembly, the country's main legislature.

The equilibrium of influence between East and West that Sihanouk had maintained since 1955, however, began to crumble in 1965 after he broke off ties with the United States and aligned his government with the PRC. Three significant factors accounted for his shift in foreign policy.

The first one was the collapse of the neutralist regime in Laos that emerged after the Soviet-backed Pathet Lao insurgency defeated the U.S.-backed Royal Lao Army at the Plain of Jars (Leifer 1967). Once the Pathet Lao was on its march toward victory, it became clear that Cambodia would have to live with a communist country on its border. Also, Sihanouk believed that communism would sweep across the Indochinese peninsula, taking over states one by one. Therefore, Cambodia had to be useful to the PRC in order to survive in the long run. The United States' stalling of Sihanouk's effort to convene a Geneva conference to neutralize Cambodia was the second cause.⁷ Meanwhile, the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime in Saigon in 1963 alarmed Sihanouk about a possible regime change effort against him led by the CIA.

The U.S.-Cambodian relations reached the breaking point in 1965 after a *Newsweek* article released on April 5 accusing Sihanouk's mother, Queen Sisowath Kossamak, of running a string of bordellos (Clymer 1999). Three weeks later, an air raid on a Cambodian village in Kampong Cham province by a U.S. plane killed a teenage boy and injured several others (Clymer 2007). Sihanouk parted ways with the United States on May 3, 1965, because he had enough of its repeated violations of Cambodia's sovereignty, its support for the Khmer Serei, and its stalling effort against his proposals on the neutralization of Cambodia. The decision marked the end of Cambodia's strict neutrality. From this point onward, Cambodia readjusted its position to align with China. Eventually, the PRC pressured Cambodia to allow the Viet Cong supply lines to run through its Sihanoukville province up to the Ho Chi Minh trail. The decision would eventually lead to attacks by U.S. B-52 Stratofortresses. Domestically, suspension of U.S. aid led to economic

⁷ In August 1960, Sihanouk began floating the idea of an internationally recognized neutral zone over Laos and Cambodia, which would withdraw any foreign forces based in these countries and would declare them outside of any military alliance (Smith 1961). The proposal failed. Sihanouk then called for a 14-nations conference to neutralize Cambodia. Although this new initiative received swift support from the socialist bloc, it failed to materialize again because the United States and its allies remained uncommitted.

damage, stirring discontent among the army, the elites, and the general public. In the end, it created a conducive environment for an internal revolt against Sihanouk in March 1970 by his right-wing prime minister, General Lon Nol.

Does Cambodia's past neutrality have any implications for its foreign policy today? The first lesson is that common borders with Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam still pose immediate threats against its national security. Although the country has enjoyed relatively peaceful borders with its neighbors since the end of the Cold War, its shared land and maritime frontiers are far from conflict-free, as armed clashes with Thailand from 2008 to 2011, controversial border demarcation issue with Vietnam and, most recently, military standoffs with Laos in 2018 and 2019 have indicated. Similar to what Norodom Sihanouk did in inviting the United States and China to guarantee Cambodia's independence and to forge a balance of power on its foreign policy and to maximize its diplomatic maneuverability, Cambodia today hedges between these two powers to seek a middle path that would guarantee its diplomatic independence, secure the borders, and safeguard its autonomy and security.

Another lesson from this Sihanouk's neutrality is that domestic politics has a great influence on Cambodia's foreign policy. Sihanouk chose neutrality to show his supporters that he would do everything to safeguard Cambodia's hard-earned independence. The policy enabled him to maintain steady flows of aid, trade, and commercial relations and to enjoy political support from both sides of the Cold War that helped him appease different constituencies at home such as the armed forces, business elites, government officials, and the general public. Likewise, Cambodia's hedging today intends to achieve the similar objective as half a century ago: maintaining relations with the U.S. and China to keep the economy growing, to safeguard internal stability, to fulfill

demands of domestic constituencies at home, to strengthen national security, to avoid choosing a side between major powers, and to protect political autonomy on the global stage.

2.2 Years of Difficulty, 1965-1979

The pressure continued to mount after Sihanouk broke off with the United States. While domestic tension was intensifying, the communist Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Serei groups increased their armed insurgency across Cambodia. Meanwhile, suspension of U.S. aid and Sihanouk's nationalization of banking and trade industries pushed the economy into a tailspin and created simmering anger among the populace (Pradhan 1987). On the foreign policy front, the Vietnam War forced 20,000 refugees into Cambodian territory by 1967, as South Vietnam and Thailand continued their military provocations along the borders.

Meanwhile, Sino-Cambodian relations ran into a crisis once the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution unraveled across the PRC in 1966. China shifted its foreign policy from *Pancha Shila* to "Red Guard diplomacy," which aimed to export revolution to foreign countries (Richardson 2010). After Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai asked Sihanouk to allow ethnic Chinese who lived in Cambodia to express their allegiance to Mao Zedong and communism, a move that broke off with the PRC's traditional policy, Sihanouk felt that he had painted himself into a corner. After all, he had once thought that Beijing would stand behind him without trying to impose its ideology within Cambodia (Pradhan 1987; Richardson 2010).

In response to this looming crisis, Sihanouk extended the olive branch to the United States. He informed one U.S. Senator that he was ready to restore ties if the United States recognized Cambodia's existing borders. Moreover, he accommodated the former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's 1967 visit to Cambodia and went so far as to erect the J. F. Kennedy Boulevard to

honor her late husband for whose assassination in 1963 Sihanouk cheered.⁸ Politically, Sihanouk promised to allow “limited American incursions” in Cambodia “under certain conditions,” a vague statement that Henry Kissinger later used to justify U.S. bombings of Cambodia (Clymer 2007). Although the U.S.-Cambodian détente led to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1969, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, and the Commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General Creighton Abrams already advocated the plan for aerial bombardment against alleged Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia. On March 17, 1969, President Richard Nixon ordered the United States Air Force (USAF) to conduct a secret one-time bombing campaign known as “Operation Breakfast” to hit Viet Cong sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia (Shawcross 1979). However, Breakfast did not stand alone. The bombing campaign was expanded with subsequent operations such as Lunch, Snack, Dinner, Dessert, and Supper that lasted until May 26, 1970. Together, they constituted “Operation Menu,” which pushed the Viet Cong deeper into the Khmer⁹ territory and destabilized Cambodia.

On March 18, 1970, while Norodom Sihanouk was in Moscow, his right-wing Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, General Lon Nol, capitalized on public resentment about the weak economy, U.S. bombings, and an alleged 50,000 Viet Cong guerillas encroaching upon Cambodian territory to orchestrate a coup against the prince (Sak 1978). This coup marked the beginning of a period of civil wars for the next two decades. Once in power, Lon Nol abolished Cambodia’s centuries-old monarchy to create a pro-U.S. military dictatorship called the “Khmer Republic.” From 1970 to 1975, Cambodia abandoned its alignment with China and became a

⁸ According to Clymer (1999), Sihanouk claimed that the deaths of Thai Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, and U.S. President John F. Kennedy, with whom he shared difficult relations, were a “divine intervention to save Cambodia” and that the three leaders “died and went to hell.”

⁹ This thesis uses “Cambodian” and “Khmer” interchangeably.

puppet of the United States. The country was dragged into the Vietnam War, a conflict that Sihanouk had tried to steer Cambodia away from over the past decade.

After the coup, Norodom Sihanouk fled to Beijing and sided with his archnemesis, the communist Khmer Rouge, to create a resistance movement called the Royal National Union Government of Kampuchea (GRUNK) with Beijing's support. The Prince called on Cambodians at home to rise against Lon Nol's regime. It was during this time that a young man named Hun Sen, who currently serves as Cambodia's Prime Minister, joined the maquis. From that day on, the Khmer Rouge used Sihanouk's name to recruit Cambodian peasants, many of whom had been devastated by U.S. bombings, into their ranks, and, as the Prince told one journalist in 1973, the Khmer Rouge would eventually spit him out like "a cherry pit" (Richardson 2010).

After the Menu campaign and the joint land invasion¹⁰ into Cambodia by South Vietnamese and U.S. troops failed to yield satisfying results, in May 1970, President Nixon ordered the USAF to conduct another air campaign, "Operation Freedom Deal," which was more intensive and lasted until 1973. Its mission was to destroy Viet Cong sanctuaries and to provide air support for Lon Nol's war against the Khmer Rouge. "I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage and there is no limitation on budget. Is that clear?" Nixon lamented to his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger (Owen and Kiernan 2007). Despite, or perhaps because of, U.S. air raids, the Khmer Rouge's army swelled from 1,000 men in 1969 to 150,000 strong by 1971 and 220,00 two years later (Kiernan 1989). From 1969 to 1973, the USAF dropped 539,129 tons of ordnance on Cambodia and killed between 50,000 and 150,000 people (Kiernan 1989; Kiernan and Owen 2015). During the entire period of the Vietnam

¹⁰ The U.S. invasion of Cambodia in early 1970 sparked a deadly anti-Vietnam War protest at Kent State University campus, which led to the killing of four students by Ohio National Guards.

War, the United States dropped 2.7 million tons of explosives, including 80,000 cluster bombs and 26 million submunitions, making Cambodia one of the most heavily bombed nations in the world (Martin et al. 2019). One-third of those bombs failed to explode and have contributed to 64,700 casualties, including 19,700 deaths, since 1979. Cambodia, as Shawcross (1979) posits, was used as a “sacrificial pawn” in the U.S.’s grand strategic design in Vietnam.

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge toppled the U.S.-backed Khmer Republic regime of Lon Nol and took over Cambodia. Once in power, they renamed the country “Democratic Kampuchea” (DK) and marched it toward a horrific chapter of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. DK implemented radical Maoism and transformed the country into a utopian agricultural project, which imitated Mao Zedong’s disastrous Great Leap Forward. Overnight, the fabric of a modern society such as money, markets, education, private property, culture, religion, and the arts were eradicated. The capital city Phnom Penh with two million residents was evacuated entirely, as people were marched at gunpoint to be relocated to provinces across the country. Public officials, monks, scholars, and students were taken away and exterminated, as were ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and Muslim Cham minority groups. People lived and worked in labor camps without sufficient food and healthcare. Power was under the control of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) with Pol Pot (aka Saloth Sar) presiding over it as General Secretary. Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia cut off its ties with the rest of the world, except for China and a few other communist states. Without Chinese support, DK would not have survived for almost four years.¹¹ Cambodia’s foreign policy dramatically realigned itself from a pro-U.S. to a pro-China.

¹¹ See Ben Kiernan (1999) for detailed accounts of China’s support for Democratic Kampuchea.

From April 1975 to January 1979, nearly two million Cambodians – a quarter of the population at the time – died from persecution, starvation, and disease under the Khmer Rouge regime.

2.3 Vietnam's Cambodia, 1979-1989

Two significant developments affecting Cambodia in fundamental ways took place from 1975 to 1989. First were border clashes between Democratic Kampuchea and its former ally, Vietnam; and the second involved Hun Sen. In 1977, Hun Sen, who had served as Deputy Regimental Commander of the Eastern Zone under the DK regime at this point, fled to Vietnam with other cadres so that they would escape an internal purge (Mehta and Mehta 2013). With Hanoi's support, he and other defectors founded the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) on December 2, 1978.¹² Then on Christmas day that year, KUNFNS, 150,000 Vietnamese troops, and other anti-Khmer Rouge elements stormed into Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge to Thailand's borders (Richardson 2010). By January 7, 1979, Vietnam had taken control of Phnom Penh, established a puppet regime called the "People's Republic of Kampuchea" (PRK), and stacked it with DK defectors. Vietnam's invasion placed Cambodia under its tutelage for the next ten years and pushed the Washington, which had its scores to settle with Hanoi, to join Beijing-led isolation of the PRK and to support the Khmer Rouge.

After ten years, Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia came to an end on September 26, 1989, thanks to political breakthroughs within the Eastern bloc. In the late 1980s, Chinese President Deng Xiaoping grew weary of the prolonged war in Cambodia and wanted to redirect resources to his economic modernization program (Zhang 2015). Meanwhile, the Soviet Union, which was having its internal struggle, pressured Vietnam to seek a détente with China (Nathan and Scobell

¹² Beside Hun Sen, two other notable men, Heng Samrin and Chea Sim, were among leaders of KUFNS who would play powerful roles in post-war Cambodia.

2012). The United States eventually cut off its support for DK. Seizing the opportunity to mend relations with Beijing, Hanoi agreed to withdraw its forces from the kingdom. After twenty years of brutal civil war and genocide, the first signs of internal stability, peace, national reconciliation, and return to normalcy were on the horizon in Cambodia.

2.4 UNTAC and the Second Kingdom of Cambodia, 1989-1998

After the DK regime collapsed in January 1979, Cambodia was politically separated into four main factions. The Vietnamese-backed PRK was now headed by 37-years-old Hun Sen, who had quickly risen from foreign minister to deputy prime minister then to prime minister on January 14, 1985, thanks to his “uncanny ability to bend with the political wind” that satisfied the Vietnamese leadership (Strangio 2014). The Khmer Rouge constituted the second faction, while the pro-Sihanouk element made up the third. The last faction was the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) of former Prime Minister Son Sann. In July 1982, the last three of these groups merged to create the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) to level the playing field against the PRK.

Shortly after Vietnamese troops withdrew from the country in 1989, a Cambodian peace negotiation was spearheaded by Australia, Indonesia, and Japan with involvements from the major powers. After two years of intensive backroom maneuver, the PRK, the CGDK, and 18 foreign powers signed the Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict, known simply as the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) on October 23, 1991, which aimed to put an end to the civil war. The PPA established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which took control of the country’s foreign affairs, national defense, finance, and policing during its 18-month mandate. One of UNTAC’s principal tasks was to oversee the first free and fair general election in the post-war era. In May 1993, 4.7 million voters participated in “Cambodia’s

freest, fairest, and most secret elections since the colonial era” (Chandler 2007). After spending \$2 billion and deploying nearly 16,000 troops, UNTAC’s mandate ended in October 1993 (Akashi 2012). UNTAC was the costliest and most ambitious peacekeeping operation ever administered by the United Nations (UN) to date. For the first time since 1970, Cambodia reopened itself to normalcy, democracy, economic development, respect for human rights, civil liberties, and peace, as at least some optimists hoped.

Although the DK boycotted it, the UNTAC-administered general election went on as planned. Among all parties running for office were the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP), which consisted of PRK veterans such as Hun Sen, Heng Samrin, and Chea Sim, and the pro-royalist FUNCINPEC led by Norodom Sihanouk’s son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.¹³ Though the UN oversaw the election, the playing field tilted mainly in favor of the CPP, which used its connections with the SOC/PRK bureaucracy to intimidate political opponents.¹⁴ According to Strangio (2014), there were about 210 politically motivated assassinations of political activists during the electoral campaign. The election results, however, turned out to be rather shocking for the CPP because it gained only 51 out of 120 seats in the Constituent Assembly. The royalist FUNCINPEC got 58 and became the majority party. In response, the CPP rejected the results, accused UNTAC of rigging the polls, then threatened to declare a secessionist zone in six eastern provinces in order to strong-arm the royalists into sharing power. Eventually, the two parties decided to form a coalition government, in which Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen would concurrently serve as first and second prime minister, respectively. The deal led to the adoption of a new constitution on

¹³ The Cambodian People’s Party is the successor organization of the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK), which ruled the PRK regime after Vietnam’s invasion in 1979. The PRKP kept its original name until October 1991 when it changed its identity to the CPP (Vickery 1994).

¹⁴ The PRK government renamed itself to the State of Cambodia (SOC) in April 1989.

September 24, 1993, which restored Norodom Sihanouk to the throne and gave birth to the second Kingdom of Cambodia.

The CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition was prone to collapse from the start because power was not shared evenly and because of mutual distrust. One of the issues facing the coalition were the remnants of the Khmer Rouge army, who had been waging guerilla warfare from the region along the border with Thailand. Tension rose as both parties tried to woo DK defectors into their ranks. When these tensions reached the breaking point on July 5-6, 1997, forces loyal to the CPP allegedly orchestrated a preemptive military coup against FUNCINPEC, which resulted in extrajudicial killings of about a hundred of the royalist's top officials and forced Ranariddh to go into exile (Strangio 2014). The power struggle induced global outcries from Southeast Asian neighbors and Western donors and delayed Cambodia's admission into ASEAN.

The coup is one of the most critical decisions in Hun Sen's political career because it elevated his status inside and outside of the CPP to that of a strongman who went against all the odds to get what he wanted and because it strongly marginalized the political influence of the royalists. Though Ranariddh returned home to participate in the second general election in 1998, FUNCINPEC slowly disintegrated into multiple factions and came to exist only in name. Hun Sen's ascent to power marks the first time since at least the 15th century that one political leader controlled the entirety of Cambodia with one unified national armed force.

Figure 2.1 on the next page shows a timeline summarizing key developments in Cambodia's contemporary political history since 1863, which powerfully shape Cambodia's internal political process and its foreign policy toward the United States and China today.

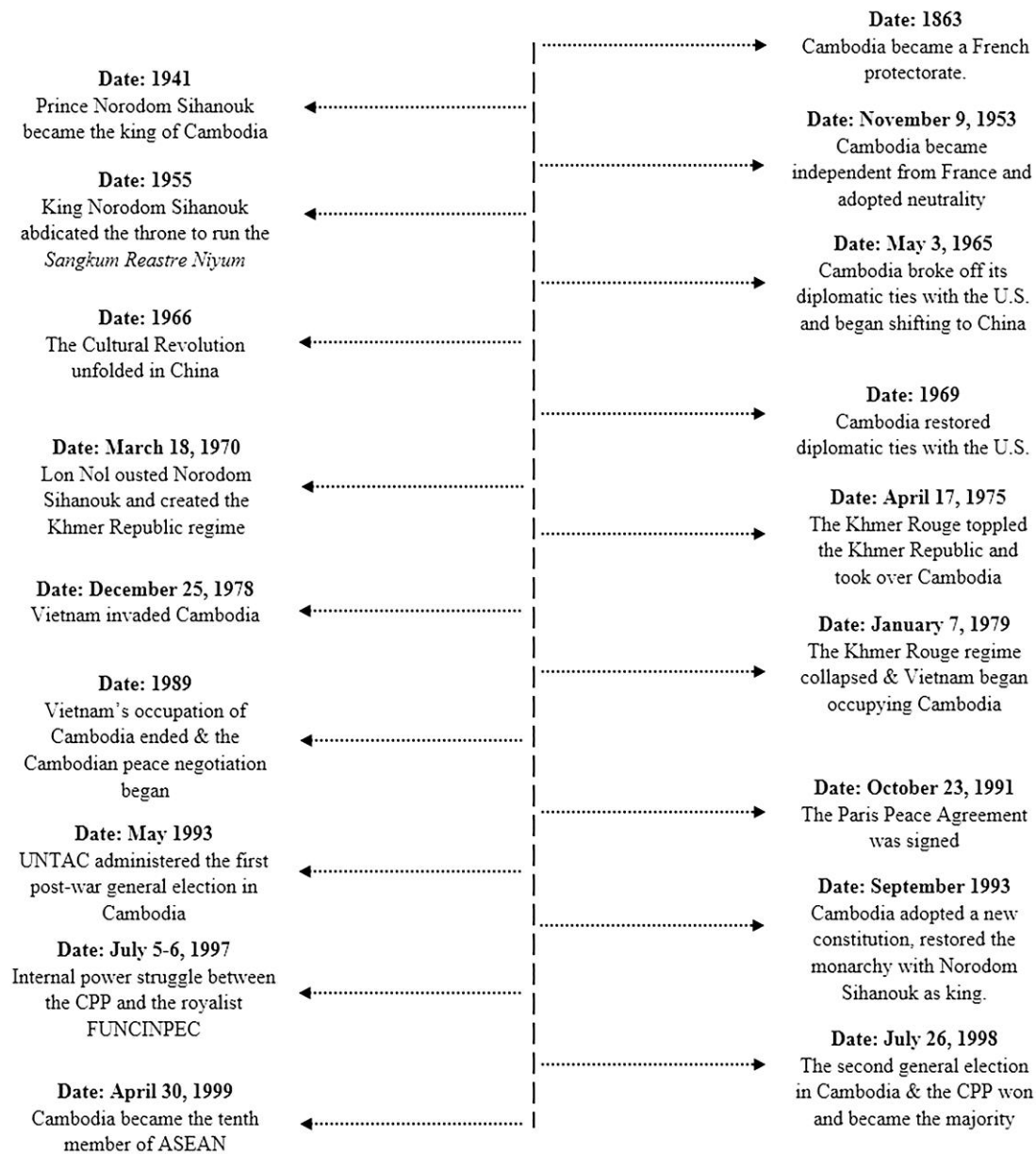


Figure 2.1 Key Events in Cambodia's Political History (Source: Author)

Now that we have discussed Cambodia's complicated history, our next task is to look at how domestic politics influences its hedging foreign policy between the United States and the People's Republic of China from 1999 to 2019. That is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3 - Domestic Politics in Cambodia's Hedging Foreign Policy, 1999-2019

This chapter examines the relationship between the independent variable, Cambodia's domestic politics, and the dependent variable, its hedging between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019. It consists of two segments: 1999-2008 and 2009-2019. In each segment, the chapter first discusses internal and external issues facing Cambodia and then studies the country's political, economic, and military relations with the United States and China around four general elections in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018.

Key Constituencies in Cambodia's Foreign Policy

There are two domestic constituencies, which are in competition with one another and have a strong influence on Cambodia's foreign policy. First is the winning coalition formed by the ruling Cambodian People's Party, whereas the second is the opposition group. The winning coalition consists of the prime minister's key selectorates, whose support is extremely vital for his political survival (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2012). This group, which favors a pro-China foreign policy, is composed of four factions. The first includes Hun Sen's closest business allies, such as CPP Senator Lao Meng Khin and his wife, Choeung Sopheap, who own powerful property development conglomerates such as Pheapimex and Shukaku Inc. Other powerful associates include CPP Senators Mong Reththy and Ly Yong Phat, and tycoons such as Kith Meng, Try Pheap, Sok Kong, and Pung Kheav Se, many of whom are of Chinese descent and have ties with Chinese investors and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Global Witness 2018; Strangio 2011).

In his comparative study about China's financial power in Southeast Asia, Daniel C. O'Neill (2018) finds that the reason that Beijing has been far more effective than the other

countries in influencing Cambodia's foreign policy is that it speaks the language that Khmer elites understand, personal ties. In what he describes as the "iron triangle" between the Chinese government and SOEs, the CPP oligarchs, and the Royal Government of Cambodia, O'Neill points to mutually beneficial reinforcements among the three parties. To support its "Go Out" strategy, Beijing channels money to its SOEs, which then use ties with the CPP oligarchs to penetrate Cambodia's risky, corruption-prone sectors such as energy and agribusiness under the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) scheme. BOT means that the RGC gives lucrative contracts to Chinese SOEs, which then build massive projects such as hydropower dams and operate them for an agreed period, which in some cases stretches to about 99 years. Once the contracts expire, these firms transfer ownership of the projects to Cambodia. Meanwhile, Beijing uses its diplomatic influence on Phnom Penh to guarantee that its SOEs receive better treatment than other foreign companies do. As co-investors in or interlocutors of Chinese investments, the CPP oligarchs have the most to gain from the political status quo and pro-China foreign policy.

The second faction in the winning coalition consists of the upper echelons of Cambodia's armed forces and security apparatus such as the heads of the RCAF, military police, and national police who keep a close tab on coercive forces. The third group includes CPP cabinet members, parliamentarians, and senators who are the gatekeepers of legislative and executive branches. The fourth group consists of poor and rural citizens, including rice farmers, plantation workers, and unemployed aging seniors who survive on remittances sent home by their adult children working in one of Cambodia's textile and footwear factories. This last faction cares much more about daily survival than about Cambodia's foreign policy. They are staunch supporters of the CPP's "7 January 1979" sloganeering, which refers to the day when Vietnamese troops toppled the Khmer Rouge and the peace, developments, and stability that have come with it. They are poor people

living across parts of underdeveloped provinces such as Svay Rieng, Stung Treng, Ratanakiri, and Preah Vihear as well as in more developed places such as Kandal, Kampong Cham, Kampong Speu, and Battambang.

One public opinion poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in early 2008 indicated that 77% of Cambodian people believed that the country was heading in the right direction (IRI 2008a). When asked why they supported the CPP, 77% pointed to developments of new roads and 63% cited the improvement of schools. Five years later, the approval rate stood at 79% for infrastructure developments, which continued to be a primary focus of those providing overwhelming support for the CPP (IRI 2013). It is crucial to note that two-thirds of respondents in these polls were rural inhabitants. Together, the CPP oligarchs, the heads of armed forces and security, CPP cabinet ministers and lawmakers, and low-income rural voters form the winning coalition, which provides Hun Sen with coercive, financial, legislative, and executive powers along with the votes required to stay in power.

In contrast, urban voters, millennials, garment and footwear factory workers, and opposition parties such as the SRP, HRP, and CNRP constitute the pro-U.S. camp, which favors a Western-style democratic system of government, free speech, free press, and open political participation. This group also favors foreign policy diversification, where Cambodia would forge ties with many like-minded states around the world in order to retain its political autonomy and territorial integrity. As Huntington (1996) argues, cities and urbanized provincial regions form the most substantial bases for opposition voices in Cambodian politics. Each of the four groups has a different aspiration for pro-U.S. foreign policy. First, the middle-class electorates living in Phnom Penh and parts of major provinces such as Siem Reap, Prey Veng, Kandal, Battambang, Kampong Cham, and Kampong Speu are financially better off, more digitally connected, and keenly aware

of public discourses than is the CPP's rural base. It includes such people as private employees, NGO workers, small- and medium-sized business owners, vendors, teachers, and low- and mid-ranking local officials.¹⁵

The second faction of the opposition group consists of millennials who are either in high school or in college or have recently gone into the job market.¹⁶ Cambodia has one of the highest percentages of adult populations in Southeast Asia (UNFPA 2016). As of August 2019, its total population stood at 15.2 million people, and 49% and 65.3% are younger than 25 and 30 years old, respectively (Mom 2019; UNFPA 2016). These millennials are highly connected through the Internet, social media, and smart devices, and they have a greater thirst for political participation than their elders. According to Bong and Sen (2017), 79% of Cambodian youth informally discuss politics among peers, while 89% believe the government should give them a broader opportunity to engage in politics and to express their views freely. An opinion poll in 2016 shows that favorable views of the United States in Cambodia are "high and particularly acute" among the youth population (Dunst 2019b). Another survey indicates that 72.6% of Cambodian college students prefer close relations with Washington, compared to only 27.4% who favor Beijing (Heng et al. 2017). Their preference for close ties with the U.S. is spurred by their exposure to and interests in U.S. pop culture, education, democracy, and human rights.

¹⁵ It is important to emphasize that the social and geographical stratification between the CPP's rural base and the middle-class electorates of the opposition group is not completely clear cut. These two groups may reside in the same provinces of Cambodia, and their foreign policy orientation is not always fixated in support of or in opposition to either pro-China or pro-U.S. camp. Some middle-class electorates may value Western-style democracy, but they also enjoy economic benefits created by commercial ties with China. Meanwhile, some poor rural families who support the CPP may also benefit from U.S. assistance and they may want to see a more democratic Cambodia. What differentiates these two groups from each other is the degree of their deference to the CPP's ruling. As explained earlier, the CPP's base tends to be more politically passive than the middle-class due to their low level of education and economic status. They are more likely than the middle-class voters to defer to Hun Sen's ruling in exchange for peace, stability, and gradually improved livelihood. In contrast, the middle-class people are more skeptical of the CPP, better informed of national politics, and more demanding of democracy, less corruption, and responsive government.

¹⁶ This thesis defines millennial as every Khmer adult who is 30 years old or younger.

The third element consists of factory workers who migrate from provinces to work in one of hundreds of garments and footwear plants in Cambodia dominated by investors from the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, and Southeast Asian countries. Unlike their aging parents who tend to be supportive of the CPP, these young workers engage in urban politics through digital platforms such as Facebook, and they are better organized through labor unions than workers in other industries. They are also likely to participate in a public protest for public policy changes, as indicated by the nationwide protest demanding higher wages following the 2013 general election. Due to their sheer number of more than a million people, they are a significant source of manpower for dissent that opposition parties such as the SRP have rallied.

The fourth faction of the opposition group consists of leading opposition parties such as the SRP, HRP, and CNRP. The SRP, for example, was overtly pro-U.S. in its platforms and rhetoric, and it received funding and technical support through U.S. government-funded NGOs, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and IRI (Strangio 2014). SRP leader Sam Rainsy has consistently appealed to lawmakers in the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament to try to galvanize Western pressure on the incumbent CPP government. Together, middle-class households, millennials, factory workers, and major opposition parties form the opposition group, which favors democracy, and, therefore, a pro-U.S. foreign policy.

Table 3.1 below is a summary of how major political parties in Cambodia performed in the last five general elections. From 1998 to 2008, the CPP's performance improved significantly, as its parliamentary seats rose from 64 in 1998 to 73 in 2003 and 90 in 2008. However, it suffered a severe blow in 2013 by losing 22 seats, thanks to the surging popularity of the CNRP.¹⁷ Then in

¹⁷ In 2012, SRP President Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, another prominent opposition leader who founded the U.S.-funded Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) before establishing the HRP, merged their parties to create the CNRP.

2018, the CPP ran without a formidable opposition and won all 125 seats in the National Assembly following the dissolution of the CNRP in September 2017 by the Supreme Court.

Table 3.1 Results of the Cambodian General Elections, 1993-2018 [Source: Un (2019)]

	1998		2003		2008		2013		2018	
Political Party	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won	Vote Share (%)	Seats Won
CPP	41.4	64	47.35	73	58.11	90	48.83	68	76.85	125
FUNCINPEC	31.7	43	20.75	26	5.05	2	3.66	0	5.89	0
CNRP	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	44.65	55	Banned	0
SRP	14.3	15	21.87	24	21.93	26	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
HRP	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	6.62	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Others	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	5.62	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

3.1 Early Hedging, 1999-2008

Internal Challenges

Coming out of 20 years of civil war and genocide, the Cambodian economy in the early 1990s was in poor shape, and it was primarily isolated from the global system. After the UNTAC mandate ended in 1993, a priority for the country was to develop its economy, to integrate itself into the international financial and economic systems, and to lift its people out of extreme poverty. Therefore, economic development was a priority for the CPP-FUNCINPEC coalition government, and this trend has continued until today. According to Table 3.2 on the next page, in 1999, Cambodia's total gross domestic product (GDP) stood at only \$3.52 billion, with income per capita of only \$295.90. Although the GDP grew threefold, the number was \$10.35 billion by 2008, making it one of the poorest economies in the world.

Foreign aid was another incentive encouraging Cambodia to maintain ties with both the United States and China. After UNTAC opened the floodgate of foreign aid, Cambodia soon

became an aid-dependent country that received more than 75% of its budget from external assistance alone between 1997 and 2008 (Ek and Sok 2008). Two-thirds of this amount came from Western entities such as the United States, Japan, the EU members, the World Bank, and the UN's specialized agencies. Foreign aid gave the Western community geoeconomics leverage, which discourages the RGC from tilting close to China. The PRC and the United States were among vital trade partners with which Cambodia dealt. Besides, the country diversified its economic relations by trading with other key players, namely, the EU, Japan, South Korea, and fellow ASEAN member states in order to create jobs and to bring in foreign capital and skills

Table 3.2 Cambodia's GDP and ODA Inflow, 1998-2008 (*Source: World Development Indicators*)

Year	GDP (current \$ billion)	GDP per capita (current \$)	Annual GDP growth (%)	Net ODA received (current \$ million)	Net ODA received (% of government budget)
1998	3.12	268.99	4.68	337.67	N/A
1999	3.52	295.90	12.70	277.45	N/A
2000	3.68	302.58	10.71	396.39	N/A
2001	3.98	321.15	7.45	415.35	N/A
2002	4.28	338.99	6.56	486.34	121.02
2003	4.66	362.34	8.51	517.29	119.52
2004	5.34	408.51	10.34	485.77	111.25
2005	6.29	474.11	13.25	538.57	112.74
2006	7.28	539.75	10.77	531.40	85.07
2007	8.64	631.53	10.21	691.40	97.58
2008	10.35	745.61	6.69	744.23	83.99

Politically speaking, a vital task for the CPP was to consolidate its power over Cambodia by improving its electoral performance and by marginalizing the influence of the royalist FUNCINPEC and the SRP. To enhance its domestic position with external influence, the CPP began courting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in order to thaw mutual suspicion and to offer Beijing an alternative to FUNCINPEC, which grew increasingly pro-West and pro-Taiwan

(Richardson 2010; Storey 2011). That said, Cambodia could not alienate Washington and its allies, which had been bankrolling much of Cambodia's national budget since the end of the civil war. The emergence of the SRP in the late 1990s posed a new threat to the CPP. Since his expulsion from the coalition government in 1995, Sam Rainsy, a Paris-trained banker whose late father had served under Norodom Sihanouk's government in the 1960s, slowly became the new face of the opposition movement in modern Cambodian politics due to his hard-hitting and open criticisms about public corruption, abuse of power, and growing authoritarianism. Rainsy echoed criticisms made against Hun Sen by hawkish U.S. lawmakers such as Congressmen Steve Chabot (R-OH), Alan Lowenthal (R-CA), Ted Yoho (R-FL), Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), Ed Royce (R-CA), Senator John McCain (R-AZ), and others in the European Parliament. His popularity among the urban electorates sheds light on the CPP's inability to capture support from the educated middle-class, which is more financially affluent than its rural base.

Inside the CPP, Hun Sen faced a powerful rival faction led by Chea Sim, a fellow DK/PRK veteran who was dominating the Ministry of Interior. Sim was attempting to propel his brother-in-law, Sar Kheng, to the top spot (Un 2019). In terms of internal security, Cambodia viewed its weak law enforcement as enabling of domestic instability. Therefore, priorities for the RGC must include the maintenance of internal peace, stability, and order as well as the modernization and professionalization of the RCAF (Cambodian Ministry of National Defense 2000; Chap and Im 2007). Meanwhile, corruption and the weak rule of law are other factors impeding economic development that must be addressed by the central government.

External Challenges

From 1999 to 2008, Cambodia faced with several external challenges. The power struggle between the CPP and the royalist FUNCINPEC in July 1997 dealt a severe blow to the country's

pushed it into diplomatic isolation. The event invited condemnation from the West and forced ASEAN to postpone the admission of Cambodia to membership (Cheunboran 2017). Therefore, a priority for the RGC was to recover its external legitimacy as a stable regime.

According to the Defense White Papers (DWP) published in 2000 and 2006, Cambodia identified several threats to its security. First, disputed control over maritime territory on the South China Sea between ASEAN members and China was a potential impediment to Cambodia's economic development (Cambodian Ministry of National Defence 2000). The RGC also emphasized the economic and security roles of the Mekong River, which is a critical commercial as well as biodiversity sources for millions of Khmer people living along this river. Third, joint land and maritime borders with Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam were potential flashpoints. For example, the discovery of oil in the Gulf of Thailand increased tension over the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA) after Bangkok revoked a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the continental shelf (Var 2017). Meanwhile, the decades-old overlapping claims at the Preah Vihear temple and its adjacent areas reignited tension in 2008 and led to a prolonged standoff until 2011. Tension also existed at the borders with Vietnam and Laos. Meanwhile, Cambodia's perilous land frontiers were potential points of entry for transnational crimes such as drugs, human trafficking, illegal immigration, and weapon proliferation. The 2000 DWP also expressed concerns about strategic uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region after the end of the Cold War.

Describing its defense posture as “flexible and controlled response,” the RGC underscored improvements of its three-layered command and control structures, border patrol, troop mobility, and living standards of uniformed members, all of which required financial and technical assistance from foreign partners such as Australia, the United States, France, and China. In its 2002 Strategic Review and the 2006 version of DWP, Cambodia's Ministry of National Defense

placed terrorism and joint borders with neighboring states on top of its list of national security concerns. The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, sent shock waves across the nation about potential terrorist activities. Although the Global War on Terror created opportunities for Cambodia to accommodate the United States, the campaign raised concern in Phnom Penh about the growing militarization of U.S. foreign policy and the erosion of a rules-based order in Asia and around the world. Cambodia was also concerned that the rise of China would present new challenges to its relations with Washington and with ASEAN members, especially Hanoi. Since 1979, Hun Sen has maintained close political relations with the Vietnamese Communist Party. Although his government had welcomed China's increasing presence after the 1997 internal power struggle with FUNCINPEC, Hun Sen has carefully walked between Beijing and Hanoi to avoid alienating either side. Getting too close with Vietnam would be costly for his local popularity since Cambodians held strong feelings toward Vietnam because of its past aggression and because of issues involving illegal Vietnamese immigrants.

Contrarily, subservience to Beijing would upset Hanoi, who is a former patron and an immediate neighbor with whom Phnom Penh needed to maintain good relations in order to secure peaceful borders, to maintain the flow of trade, and to preserve domestic stability. Although this is not an exhaustive list of every domestic and foreign policy challenge Cambodia faced from 1999 to 2008, it gives us a sense of the risks and opportunities facing the RGC as it hedged between the United States and China. Now that we discussed what the kingdom faces internally and externally, the next step is to analyze how its foreign policy vis-à-vis these two powers shifted during the 2003 and 2008 general elections.

3.1.1 Chinese-Cambodian Relations: From Former Foe to Close Friend

Political Ties

Sino-Cambodian relations in the early 1990s can be characterized as a mutual precaution. For its part, China maintained an ambiguous position toward both the CPP and FUNCINPEC. Although it viewed the CPP as better organized than the royalists due to its strong rural base, Beijing was suspicious of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, who had previously served under the Vietnam-backed PRK government. Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who is the son of Norodom Sihanouk, led the FUNCINPEC, but his lackluster leadership, the Party's internal fighting, and its elitist and pro-Western tendencies did not inspire Beijing's confidence either. China was primarily upset by Ranariddh's decision allowing the establishment of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECO) in Cambodia in 1994 and was upset as well by a visit to Taiwan by a deputy mayor of Phnom Penh close to FUNCINPEC one year later (Thayer 2013a). In 1996, Beijing got furious when Ranariddh announced that EVA Air, a Taiwanese commercial airline, would begin direct flight between Phnom Penh and Taipei. The PRC was upset that the content of that agreement "bore too close a resemblance" to Cambodia's official diplomatic recognition of Taiwan (Richardson 2010). The 1997 joint request by Cambodian co-prime ministers asking the UN to help establish the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT) to prosecute former DK leaders was an alarm for Beijing as it would implicate it for its supporting roles in the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979.

To avoid betting on the wrong horse, China, therefore, adopted a wait-and-see approach by keeping both parties at arm's length. By 1996, Beijing grew increasingly wary of Ranariddh, with his cozying up to Taiwan. As a result, China began its courting for close relations with Hun Sen, the man who would become the real kingmaker in Cambodia. China sent a special plane to pick

up the Second Prime Minister for a “royal” visit in Beijing on July 18-23, 1996, where he witnessed the conclusion of agreements in bilateral trade and on the protection of investment as well as exchange agreements between the CPP and the CCP (Jeldres 2012). Less than a year later, on 5-6 July 1997, First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh was ousted from office in an armed power struggle with Hun Sen. While the United States condemned the CPP for the event and suspended \$25 million in aids to Cambodia, the PRC seized this opportunity to cement its influence. It became the first country to recognize the reconstituted government with Ung Huot as Ranariddh’s replacement and provided a loan worth \$10 million, including \$2.8 million of military equipment for an army unit loyal to the Second Premier (Storey 2011; Strangio 2014).

That was the turning point in contemporary Chinese-Cambodian relations. “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” With intense international pressure aimed at Cambodia, China stood behind its old foe, Hun Sen, and offered him the legitimacy he desperately needed. Since then, Cambodia’s limited bandwagoning with the PRC began to kick in. It took a page from Norodom Sihanouk’s 1960s playbook by becoming a very strict enforcer of the “One China” policy. For instance, Cambodia closed down TECO, banned the Taiwanese flag, and prohibited RGC officials from visiting the island (Thayer 2013a). Moreover, it allowed the number of Chinese language schools to increase from 13 in 1995 to 60 in 1999. Hun Sen went so far as to downplay China’s ideological influence on the Khmer Rouge, arguing that DK’s genocidal methods and policies were exported from North Korea, although China had sent hundreds of technical advisors to support the Khmer Rouge (Richardson 2010). In the aftermath of the U.S. bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and during the EP-3 incident over Hainan Island in 2001, Cambodia stood firmly on China’s side. Furthermore, it took a hardline stance on religious issues by refusing to invite the Dalai Lama to the Third World Buddhist Conference held in Phnom Penh in 2002 and

by deporting followers of the Falun Gong cult, which was banned by the Beijing government (Saing and Doyle 2002).

Sino-Cambodian diplomatic rapprochement in post-1997 was mutual. After the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, China was the “loneliest” power, whose global influence was made “partial” because it lacked the complex web of friendships and security alliances of the kind that countries such as the United States had developed over generations (Pei 2012; Shambaugh 2013). The crackdown in Tiananmen Square isolated China from the world, but it also led China’s leaders to see Cambodia as offering an opportunity to forge a friendship and to establish a presence in mainland Southeast Asia. Deepening ties with Cambodia would also create strategic leverage over Vietnam (Burgos and Ear 2010). For its part, the RGC did not intend to use the “Chinese card” to get rid of Western presence completely. What it sought was a reliable partner who could provide Cambodia with breathing space from Western pressure (Long 2009). Cheunboran (2017) argues that growing ties with China after 1997 provided Cambodia with strategic comfort that offsets threats from Thailand and Vietnam and accelerated its admission into ASEAN, whose members were concerned that leaving Phnom Penh out of the grouping would push it closer to Beijing.

Political relations between China and Cambodia reached a significant milestone in 2000 when they signed the Joint Statement on the Framework of Bilateral Cooperation, which laid out the groundwork between both countries’ governments, political parties, and armed forces. Hun Sen touted the development as having “long term and strategic significance” (Storey 2011). From 2005 to 2008, Cambodia continued to give particular policy deference to China in order to maintain close relations. For example, it supported the PRC’s anti-secession law and opposed Taiwan’s and Japan’s bids for membership in the UN and on the Security Council, respectively. In 2006, bilateral ties were upgraded to the Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation, which was meant to enhance

government-to-government as well as party-to-party ties and to foster collaborative legislative exchanges and policies supporting shared international interests (Thayer 2013a). By December 2008, the first Confucius Institute was established in Phnom Penh, signaling the growing presence of Chinese public diplomacy.

There are three reasons why Cambodia opted for limited bandwagoning with China from 1999 to 2008. First, the PRC had maintained a non-interventionist position regarding Cambodia's domestic politics. Due to their mutual hostility toward Washington's democracy-promoting foreign policy, the CPP and the CCP saw one another as partners who had a common cause. Second, diplomatic tension with the United States over gridlock in the Cambodian National Assembly and over lawsuits against opposition lawmakers in 2005, which attracted bipartisan condemnation from the U.S. Congress, pressured Phnom Penh to seek moral support from Beijing. Third, the military standoff with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple in 2008 escalated into prolonged clashes reminding Cambodia of its geographical vulnerability and the threats posed by its immediate neighbors (Cheunboran 2017; Long 2009). Its weak military, marginal international credibility, and the inadequacy of third-party mediation by ASEAN forced Cambodia to seek external influence from China. Nonetheless, the kingdom kept a certain distance from Beijing by concurrently engaging Washington, which was seeking Cambodian cooperation in its War on Terror. In this way, the CPP government could extract military assistance from Washington to improve its armed forces, maintain access to the U.S. consumer market, and sideline the pro-U.S. domestic opposition led by Sam Rainsy. Last, given Cambodia's recent admission into ASEAN in 1999 and its growing interests in multilateral diplomacy, subservience to China would alienate other ASEAN members.

Here, we see evidence of Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with China resulted in improvement in their political relations after the CPP marginalized FUNCINPEC in the July 1997 power struggle. Because Cambodia became a strict enforcer of the "One China" policy and began siding with the PRC on international issues, the two countries upgraded their political ties to a comprehensive partnership in 2006, as government-to-government cooperation expanded steadily despite two general elections in 2003 and 2008.

Economic Ties

Chinese aid and investment garnered Cambodia's support. For example, after the United States suspended aids in post-July 1997, China stepped in with \$10 million in assistance (Storey 2011). Beijing reciprocated Cambodia's accommodations of its Taiwan policies and other sensitive issues with \$200 million worth of agricultural and infrastructure loans, half of which were interest-free, and another \$18 million in foreign assistance after the CPP won the 1998 election (Richardson 2010). One year later, Beijing gave \$200 million in infrastructure loans without interest, as the two countries signed a bilateral agreement to promote trade and investment.

Table 3.3 Cambodia's Trade with China, 1999-2008 [Source: International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics (data.imf.org)]

Year	Exports to (mainland) China (\$ million)	Imports from (mainland) China (\$ million)	Trade Balance (\$ million)
1999	8.9	85.9	-77
2000	23.7	112.8	-89.1
2001	16.7	86.9	-70.2
2002	8.3	197.7	-189.4
2003	6.4	223.3	-216.9
2004	12.6	341.8	-329.1
2005	14.2	423.51	-409.27
2006	15.5	523.85	-508.35
2007	46.44	969.38	-922.94
2008	12.91	934.95	-922.04

Cambodia's total goods exchanged with China between 1999 and 2008 were small when compared to its trade with the United States. Its exports to the PRC went through ups and downs and remained small in volume. Moreover, Cambodia imported much more than it was able to sell back to China. As a result, the total trade deficit with China grew more than tenfold from \$77 million in 1999 to \$216 million in 2003 and \$922 million in 2008. It is worth mentioning here that in stark contrast with the PRC, the United States is Cambodia's single biggest export market.

During the 2002 ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji announced that China would forgive all debts owed to the PRC by Cambodia. The total amount was estimated to be as high as \$1 billion, which included loans received under the Khmer Rouge regime. Moreover, China offered \$39 million in grants and another \$95 million in soft loans for the 2000-2006 period (Thayer 2013a). In 2006, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to the kingdom, he pledged \$600 million in financial assistance in a multiyear project. One year later, China dominated the group of foreign donors to the Cambodian reconstruction effort led by the World Bank, known as the Consultative Group (CG). China gave \$91 million out of a total package of \$689 million (Storey 2011). By 2008, the PRC had provided another \$208 million to build irrigation systems, roads, and power transmission lines. By the end of that year, it had contributed \$257 million to the CG's annual packages, set at \$951 million

Three characteristics differentiated Chinese aid from that of the United States. First, Chinese assistance drew directly from government accounts, whereas the United States strictly channeled the money to local and international NGOs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Second, U.S. aid concentrates in strategic sectors vital to its interests such as civil society, democratization, community development, public health, and education, while China was the primary benefactor on infrastructure developments in rural, underdeveloped regions

where the CPP's key constituents resided. Third, Washington attached strict human rights conditions to its aid, but Beijing did not. For example, Heng (2012) and O'Neill (2018) explain that, instead of placing conditions on democracy, China has sought foreign policy accommodation and favorable treatments for its investment firms.

In addition to providing aid, China was one of the largest foreign investors. By 2007, it dominated Cambodia's investment landscape with total capital of \$1.58 billion. One year later, the amount jumped by nearly threefold to \$4.3 billion, which represented 40% of Cambodia's total FDI inflow that year. Unlike Western companies, which have avoided pouring in money into corruption-prone sectors, Chinese firms have used ties with the CPP to conduct backroom dealings and penetrate risky sectors such as construction, mining, and energy, especially hydropower.

To summarize, as the hypothesis predicts, Cambodia's economic relations with China remained stable and grew over time from 1999 to 2008, even though the former went through two general elections in 2003 and 2008. While Cambodia's trade deficit with China expanded, total two-way trade volume rose significantly. Meanwhile, Beijing provided Phnom Penh with a considerable amount of aid to help it develop physical infrastructures. That is because the kingdom continuously implemented economic pragmatism in its hedging toward China with a high degree of stability and consistency.

Military Ties

Although bilateral military relations with China in the early 2000s were lukewarm and progressed slower than cooperation with the United States, Cambodia looked for additional sources of military aid from the Chinese in order to strengthen internal security and self-defense, to prepare for potential terrorist activities, and to navigate the geopolitical fluidity in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. This policy constituted an indirect balancing element in

hedging toward Beijing, in which Phnom Penh concurrently improved its defense capability while forging non-alliance military relations with this power in exchange for material and technical support that would help modernize its armed forces. Furthermore, ties short of formal alliance projected a nuanced image of Cambodia's alignment posture, showing it to be willing to work with any country as long as its military autonomy is not subjected to the small power-big power imbalance that might drag it into an unwanted conflict.

In 1996, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) offered \$1 million worth of financial assistance to the RCAF, as the number of Chinese military attachés in Phnom Penh increased to more than 30 (Thayer 2013a). Immediately after the Cambodian political crisis in 1997, the PRC provided 116 military trucks and 70 jeeps with a total value of \$2.8 million. There were also high-level visits by RCAF leaders to China. For example, in 1999, Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Banh toured the PRC for four days, where he met with then-Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao and with the head of the PLA's General Staff Fu Quanyou (Marks 2000). Later that year, China donated \$1.5 million for the RCAF's construction of army barracks along with ten jeeps, ten ambulances, and parachutes. In 2003, the two countries signed an MOU to provide financial support for the RGC's troop demobilization, construction of barracks, military schools, and hospitals, and professional education for the uniformed members. These expenditures were aimed at improving the RCAF's power against external threats and maintaining internal stability.

The 2006 Comprehensive Partnership for Cooperation agreement took bilateral defense ties to a new level as China began donating more material and technical assistance to its counterpart. For example, the agreement expanded military exchanges into non-traditional security issues, as China donated nine patrol boats valued at \$60 million to the Royal Cambodian Navy in order to help it to maintain control of the coastline and offshore oilfields in the Gulf of Thailand

(Storey 2011). China also financed the refurbishment of the Ream Naval Base, raising speculation among U.S. officials that the location could potentially connect to China's "string of pearls" maritime strategy for protecting Chinese sea lines of communication (SLOC) between the Pacific and the Indian oceans. By the end of 2008, Cambodia hosted a ship from the Chinese PLA Navy at Sihanoukville harbor. As with economic pragmatism and limited bandwagoning, Cambodia's indirect balancing with China experienced a gradual but steady expansion during two general elections in 2003 and 2008. Despite assistance from the United States and other countries, Cambodia welcomed cooperation and support from China through its ties short of an alliance in order to improve its armed forces and prepare against the prospect of external threats.

Cambodia's deepening military relations with China in the 1999-2008 period indicates its stable exercise of indirect balancing in hedging strategy. The country fostered a non-alliance partnership with and extracted military assistance from the PRC to modernize its armed forces and prepare itself for the evolving strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. The non-alliance nature of the defense ties with China is crucial for Cambodia's hedging strategy because it sends a signal to its Southeast Asian neighbors, the United States, and other countries that it is a non-aligned and autonomous player. As we will see in the next section, this particular policy also extended to its hedging vis-à-vis the United States.

3.1.2 United States-Cambodian Relations: From Sanctions to Engagement

Political Ties

Although the CPP had dominated national politics since 1998, the royalist FUNCINPEC remained a formidable force, and the SRP had gradually established itself as an emerging face of the opposition movement. Two preeminent events dominated national politics before the July 2003 general election. The first was an anti-Thai riot in Phnom Penh, which led to mobbed ransack of

the Thai Embassy.¹⁸ Although Cambodia had to pay \$50 million to Thailand for damage reparation, the event created a “rally ‘round the flag” effect, helping to propel the CPP to a victory. Another event involved the assassinations of two notable critics. One of them was Sam Buntheoun, a dissident monk who advocated for monks’ right to vote. The second case was Om Radsady, FUNCINPEC’s senior advisor, who was killed two weeks after Buntheoun (Strangio 2014). There were two dozen other politically motivated homicides of opposition activists before polling day (IRI 2003; Sayres and Lum 2002).

The election on July 27, 2003, handed a victory to the CPP, which won 77 seats, even though it fell short of the two-thirds majority that was required to authorize the unilateral formation of a new government. As a result, the SRP and FUNCINPEC, which received 24 and 26 seats, respectively, formed the “Alliance of Democrats” and boycotted the parliament to press the CPP for political concessions. The impasse dragged on for almost a year, and there was no new government until Prince Norodom Ranariddh agreed to form another uneasy coalition with Hun Sen in June 2004, following the CPP’s concession that the prince would become President of the National Assembly. Left out in the cold by FUNCINPEC, the SRP became the sole leading voice of opposition movement in Cambodia.

By late 2004, there were lawsuits filed against two SRP members, Chea Poch and Cheam Channy, on charges of defamation and operation of a secret army, respectively (Strangio 2014). Hun Sen sued Sam Rainsy himself after Rainsy accused him of involvement in the 1997 grenade attacks. In February 2005, the CPP-dominated National Assembly stripped these three SRP

¹⁸ On January 18, 2003, one local Khmer newspaper alleged that the popular Thai actress Sovanan Kongying had recently remarked that “she would only ever accept an invitation to perform in Cambodia if the famous Angkor Wat [temple] was returned to Thailand” and that “if she was reincarnated, she would rather be a dog than a Khmer national” (Deth 2014). Her comments were offensive for Cambodians, who generally view Thai people with historical animosity due to Thailand’s past subjugation of Cambodia’s territory. The incident led angry protestors to burn down Thailand’s embassy and dozens of Thai-owned businesses in Phnom Penh.

lawmakers of parliamentary immunity, forcing Poch and Rainsy to flee Cambodia, as Channy was detained in a military prison. Later that year, Mam Sonando, owner of an independent radio station, and Rong Chhun, leader of a teachers' union, were arrested for criticizing the recent demarcation agreement with Vietnam, while three NGO members were apprehended. After the 2003 election, the assassination of Chea Vichea, a prominent labor union leader who rallied with Sam Rainsy, dominated national politics and added more frictions between Phnom Penh and Washington.

Cambodia's political relations with the United States between 1999 and 2008 took a very different trajectory from its dealing with China due to the concern of Washington at the deterioration of democracy and human rights in Cambodia. While political ties experienced turbulences, cooperation in economic and military realms improved significantly, as the hypothesis posits. After the UNTAC mission concluded in May 1993, Washington re-established diplomatic relations with Charles S. Twinning as ambassador. Relations began to nosedive following a grenade attack against a demonstration led by Sam Rainsy on March 30, 1997, which killed 16 protestors and injured more than a hundred others, including one U.S. citizen (Strangio 2014). Following the CPP-FUNCINPEC power struggle in July, the Clinton administration suspended direct aid and opposed international loans to Cambodia, except for those used for humanitarian purposes (Thayer 2012). Meanwhile, the restrictions on political freedom and delays in negotiation for the Khmer Rouge Tribunal cemented criticism in U.S. Congress (Sayres and Lum 2002).

Circumstances changed when the Bush administration's War on Terror, which identified Southeast Asia as its "second front," created an opportunity for Cambodia to bandwagon with U.S. policy to undo the damages incurred since the 1997 internal power struggle. Due to weak control over borders and dismal counterterrorism capability, Cambodia was a primary concern for U.S. policymakers, who perceived it as a potential springboard for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda's

affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). UN officials also expressed concerns that JI could potentially recruit new members from Cambodia's Muslim Cham minority. These suspicions turned out to be true after authorities found that the chief planner of the 2002 Bali bombing, Hambali (Riduan Isamuddin), took refuge in Phnom Penh for several months after the tragic attacks that killed 202 people, including seven U.S. citizens. In response, Cambodia cooperated with U.S. officials in 2004 to destroy 233 Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. Cambodia then arrested four suspects linked to JI, shut down a Saudi Arabi-funded Islamic school, and took a hardline on Wahabism (Lum 2007; Stern 2009). It worked with Australian and British officials to draft a counterterrorism law and agreed to exempt U.S. citizens living in its territory from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Furthermore, Cambodia signed a refugee repatriation deal with the United States in 2002 that allows the deportation of Khmer refugees back to their native country. To reciprocate the favors, Washington arrested members of the Cambodian Freedom Fighters, whom Phnom Penh accused of violent incitements, and inked a bilateral agreement to prohibit the export of ancient Khmer artifacts (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia 2010). Political rapprochement continued after Cambodia ratified an agreement with the UN in 2004 to establish a hybrid tribunal to try senior Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed from 1975 to 1979. This ratification was arguably a win for Washington and a loss for China, which had failed to convince the Cambodian National Assembly to reject the UN deal.

Due to Cambodia's accommodations with the War on Terror, bilateral relations between the United States and Cambodia prior to the 2003 general election improved steadily despite the deterioration of democracy. To reiterate U.S. commitment to Cambodian democracy, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell visited the country three weeks before the election, where he met

with political parties and expressed hope for a free and fair procedure (U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh 2010). As expected, the CPP won the 2003 election. Despite irregularities, vote-buying, unfair access to media, and alleged intimidation against opposition members, Washington concluded that the election was “more orderly” and “transparent” than the one that occurred five years ago (Lum 2007). Nevertheless, after the Cambodian National Assembly stripped off the parliamentary immunity of three SRP lawmakers in February 2005, the tension that had been building up in previous years began to spill out into public rhetoric. The United States issued a strong statement condemning the CPP-controlled legislature for “intimidation of opposition voices” (Lum 2007). Less than two weeks later, U.S. Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) introduced a resolution calling for Channy’s release (S. Res. 65). Tension reached a new high after several critics such as Yeng Virak, Kem Sokha, Rong Chhun, and Chea Mony were arrested between late 2005 and early 2006 (Human Rights Watch 2005). On 25 January 2006, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution calling for the dropping of charges against political prisoners (S. Res. 353).

According to Thayer (2012), Hun Sen played his trump card by getting soft with Washington in 2006 because of pressure from Western donors and concern that Cambodia had been moving too far away from the United States politically. For these reasons, an hour after he met with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher R. Hill, who was on tour to Phnom Penh to inaugurate a new \$47 million embassy, the Cambodian leader ordered the release of jailed dissidents and told Hill that the decision was a “gift” for the new diplomatic compound (Strangio 2014). Tension eased after the Cambodian king pardoned Sam Rainsy, who then returned home in February and had his parliamentary seat reinstated along with those of Poch and Channy.

Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with the United States yielded positive results as bilateral ties improved for the next two years, even though U.S. foreign policy toward Cambodia at this point separated into two camps. The first camp advocated a hardline stance that tied aid and cooperation to Cambodia's human rights records, whereas the second camp advocated broader engagement to push for a democratic Cambodia and to offset Chinese influence (Lum 2007). At the same time that the U.S. Congress had consistently maintained a bipartisan and tough stance, the White House had adopted a more flexible tone (Thayer 2012).

In December 2005, former U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Phnom Penh, where he met with Hun Sen and signed a Memorandum of Understanding, allowing the Clinton Foundation to upgrade Cambodia's national health laboratories and to provide anti-retroviral medications (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia 2010). By 2007, the Bush administration officially lifted the 10-years ban on civilian and military aid to Cambodia imposed by the Clinton administration. On April 4, 2007, the first cohort of 29 Peace Corps volunteers began two-year assignments in seven Cambodia's provinces. Later that month, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) hosted Cambodia's National Police Chief General Hok Lundy in Washington D.C. to enhance counterterrorism cooperation. Before the 2008 election, Cambodia's political relations with the United States were more stable than five years earlier due to Cambodia's accommodations with the War on Terror. For example, FBI Director Robert Mueller visited the kingdom to inaugurate a legal attaché office in January of that year to boost legal cooperation (Lum 2009). Two months after the election that had been held on July 27, which handed the CPP its biggest victory to date, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte paid an official visit carrying \$24 million in aid (Thayer 2012). He also announced the U.S. decision to provide financial support to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which it had withheld since 2006 due to concern about the court's independence (Lum 2018).

What explains the United States' soft approach toward Cambodia this time around? First, the 2008 election was widely viewed by observers as more peaceful, better organized, and relatively freer of irregularities than the election five years prior (Lum 2009). From a war-stricken country that had previously divided and destabilized Southeast Asia, Cambodia had come a very long way from its tragic past, and its signs of progress deserved some praise. Whether it liked it or not, Washington had to learn to live with Hun Sen because he was the only person who could get things done, as attested by two former U.S. ambassadors (Strangio 2014). Second, Washington had already won a crucial political concession in 2006 when SRP leader Sam Rainsy, Cheam Channy, and Chea Poch were pardoned and allowed to return to politics and when other jailed dissidents were also released. Besides, as Levitsky and Way (2010) argue in their book on competitive authoritarianism, the Bush administration had competing foreign policy goals, and it was pulled toward taking a hard stance on rights issues and yet working with Cambodia to improve its counterterrorism capability that would serve the U.S. interests of its War on Terror.

Overall, evidence shows that Cambodia's political relations with the United States deteriorated after the 2003 general election. Five years later, this pattern repeated itself. However, since this part covers the developments between 1999 and 2008, what happened after the 2008 election are discussed in the 2009-2019 section. It is vital to note that instability in U.S.-Cambodian ties in the early 2000s was mostly rhetorical and did not result in significant setbacks in government-to-government engagement. Even though the CPP suppressed domestic opposition during elections, which, according to the hypothesis, would lead the United States to respond negatively by reducing the intensity of cooperation, the Bush administration took a soft approach to gain Cambodia's collaboration with the War on Terror. This posture indicates the result of Cambodia's limited bandwagoning in hedging. The friendly position of the Bush administration

in post-election challenges the argument that backsliding in Cambodian democracy will strain its political relations with the United States. However, it does not alter the fact that ties between the two countries experienced fluctuations around the 2003 and 2008 elections.

Economic Ties

In stark contrast to the political realm, U.S.-Cambodian economic ties from 1999 to 2008 had steadily improved with little to no fluctuation regardless of the elections in 2003 and 2008. As explained earlier, Cambodia, under the ruling CPP, adopted economic pragmatism in its hedging toward the United States because the latter was the single largest export market since the early 1990s. In 1996, the United States inked a trade deal with Cambodia at the same time that the U.S. Congress granted its normal trade relations (NTR) status. Then in 1997, it listed Cambodia in the Least Developed Country (LDC) category under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP). Three years later, the two countries expanded trade relations by signing a three-year agreement. Cambodia was allowed to expand its export quota based on compliance with international labor rights standards (Sayres and Lum 2002). As a consequence, its textile exports to the United States rose dramatically from \$3.6 million in 1996 to almost \$1 billion by 2001. In 2006, the two countries signed the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), which led to the establishment of the U.S.-Cambodia Joint Council on Trade and Investment, a body co-chaired by the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce and the U.S. Trade Representative serving as a forum to address intellectual property rights, banking, and financial services (Thayer 2012).

As a result, Cambodia's exports to the U.S. jumped from \$592.6 million in 1999 to \$1.26 billion in 2003, and \$2.41 billion by the end of 2008, while U.S. exports to the kingdom increased by sevenfold from \$20 million to \$152.2 million. The U.S. exports to Cambodia consisted mainly of vehicles, machinery, animal feed, food waste, paper, soybeans, beef, grains, and nonwoven

textiles, whereas Cambodia exported back textile, footwear, plastics, leather products, and rubber (U.S. Trade Representative n.d.). Trade figures shown in Table 3.4 indicate an upward trend in two-way trade, as Cambodia enjoyed a growing trade surplus with the United States every year.

Table 3.4 Cambodia's Trade with and Foreign Assistance from the U.S., 1999-2008
[Source: Lum (2004, 2007, 2009), Sayres and Lum (2002), and U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.)]

Year	Exports To (\$ million)	Imports From (\$ million)	Trade Balance (\$ million)	Development Assistance (\$ million)
1999	592.6	20.0	572.6	N/A
2000	852.6	31.7	793.9	N/A
2001	962.5	29.6	932.9	37
2002	1,071.1	29.3	1,041.8	N/A
2003	1,262.1	57.9	1,204.2	43
2004	1,497.4	58.9	1,438.5	52.9
2005	1,767.0	69.7	1,697.3	60.2
2006	2,188.4	74.5	2,113.9	54.9
2007	2,463.4	138.8	2,324.6	57
2008	2,411.5	154.2	2,257.6	55

The United States was also an essential source of foreign aid. Although the Clinton administration restricted bilateral assistance to the RGC in 1997, exceptions were made for aid in areas such as HIV/AIDs, human trafficking, civil society, demining, and humanitarian necessities (Sayres and Lum 2002). Since 1996, Washington was a major contributor to the Cambodian reconstruction efforts. From 1998 to 2007, international donors pledged \$5.5 billion worth of official development assistance (ODA)¹⁹ to Cambodia, two-thirds of which came from the United States and other Western entities, and a half of which was spent on education, infrastructure,

¹⁹ OECD (2019) defines ODA as “government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfares of developing countries.”

health, and public governance (Ek and Sok 2008). By 2007, Cambodia had become the third-largest recipient of U.S. assistance in East Asia and the Pacific region (Thayer 2012).

In contrast to the political arena, Cambodia's economic ties with the United States were stable for the entire 1999-2008 period. Nothing confirms this pattern of its economic pragmatism in hedging more than growing bilateral trade. Unlike its trade with China, which ran on a deficit, the kingdom sold to the United States many times more than it purchased back. Meanwhile, Washington provided Phnom Penh with a modest amount of bilateral aid, which was small compared to Chinese assistance but played a supplementary role in areas such as democracy, civil society, and public health. The evidence supports the hypothesis that, unlike limited bandwagoning, Cambodia's economic pragmatism toward the United States from 1999 to 2008 experienced only stability and matured over time despite two contentious elections. It is because maintaining access to the U.S. market, aid, and other commercial exchanges helped the ruling CPP government maintain its domestic legitimacy.

Military Ties

Although U.S.-Cambodian military relations ran into a major hurdle after a power struggle in Cambodia in 1997, ties improved gradually throughout the entire Bush administration. These positive developments were results of spillover effects from the RGC's cooperation in the War on Terror, and they were also made easier by improved domestic stability in Cambodian politics following the 2003-2005 parliamentary gridlock. After seven years of suspension, defense relations resumed in 2004. However, it would take another three years for direct military aid to resume. After bilateral defense channels had been reestablished, the United States began providing training support to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces through the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program in the areas of border patrol and counterterrorism. In 2005, 40 RCAF personnel

participated in U.S.-funded training as Cambodia became qualified for the Regional Defense Counterterrorism Fellowship Program, which had provided English language instruction and demining lessons for its armed forces. Despite the political tension arising from charges made against SRP lawmakers, military cooperation grew stronger without interruption. This maturity happened because rapprochement in military ties was arguably a matter of mutual benefit. The United States needed Cambodia's cooperation for its counterterrorism efforts in Southeast Asia and to offset encroaching Chinese influence, while Cambodia looked to the United States for defense assistance to strengthen its army and to improve law enforcement. Moreover, broader military relations helped Cambodia retain its distance from the Chinese PLA and to maintain balance in its hedging. Between 2004 and 2006, the United States provided Cambodia with \$4.5 million in equipment and technical assistance (Thayer 2012).

After Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia in 2006, a positive trend in the U.S.-Cambodia military relationship continued for the next two years. For example, Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Banh visited the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) to seek assistance for the modernization of RCAF. Later that year, PACOM Commander Admiral William Fallon paid a "get-to-know-you" visit back to Cambodia to explore in more concrete terms what Banh's call for modernization might require (Voice of America 2007). The high point came in February 2007 when the *USS Gary*, a guided-missile frigate, paid a port visit to Sihanoukville. It was the first presence of the U.S. Navy in Cambodian waters since the 1975 *Mayaguez* Incident. During that five-day visit, some 230 U.S. sailors interacted with their counterparts in the Royal Cambodian Navy and engaged with local villagers through sporting events and goodwill medical checkups (Little 2007). Less than a year later, the *USS Essex* conducted a similar mission at the same time when a team from the U.S. Marine Corps began training personnel in Cambodia's National

Counter-Terrorism Special Force (NCTSF), a newly established body created in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks with financial and technical aid from the U.S. government. In 2008, Washington donated 60 trucks and \$4 million in military aid to assist the RCAF with participation in international peacekeeping operations, an activity that would boost Cambodia's global image (Lum 2009; Thayer 2012).

Improvement in Cambodia's military relations with the United States from 1999 to 2008 indicates its steady and continuous implementation of indirect balancing in hedging. The country forged non-alliance relations with the United States to extract logistical and financial resources that improved its capabilities in such areas as counterterrorism, border control, maritime domain awareness, and global peacekeeping. These ties created an opportunity for RCAF personnel to gain invaluable operational experience from their interactions with U.S. forces. Furthermore, they helped Cambodia diversify its defense engagement and project an ambiguous alignment posture, as ties with U.S. military balanced against the RCAF's reliance on the PLA. Because the 9/11 terrorist attacks paved the way for the RGC to collaborate with the War on Terror, a stable upward trajectory in U.S.-Cambodia military relations took place through the 2003 and 2008 general elections without any notable interruption.

Key Findings

How did Cambodia hedge between the United States and China during the first decade of the twenty-first century? Here, there is evidence confirming the hypothesis that the kingdom maintains consistent military and economic relations with both powers but shifts politically away from the United States but not China during the election years.

First, Cambodia implemented economic pragmatism concurrently toward the United States and the PRC to extract foreign aid and FDI, and to bolster bilateral trade, which benefits the local

economy. Although the 1997 political crisis in Cambodia had led the United States to restrict bilateral aid, the kingdom was soon after granted LDC status as well as an increased export quota expanded based on compliance with international labor standards. As a result, Cambodia's exports to the United States quadrupled from \$592.6 million in 1999 to \$2.41 billion by the end of 2009, the upward trend being sustained every single year despite numerous cases of human rights violations and two elections in 2003 and 2008. At the same time, U.S. exports to Cambodia also expanded sevenfold, as the latter enjoyed a growing trade surplus every year.

Cambodia's economic exchanges with China also flourished, namely, in the area of bilateral aid. Since Cambodia was a small country with an economy crippled by war, the financial assistance from China played a critical role in the construction of infrastructures such as roads, bridges, and irrigation systems that legitimized rule by the CPP government. Direct Chinese aid to the RGC gave the latter more flexibility and authority over how it allocated resources between private goods for the winning coalition and public goods for ordinary citizens. Trade with China is another area of economic relations. In contrast to the relationship it has with the United States, Cambodia imported much more from China than it was able to sell back, leaving it with a growing trade deficit every year from only \$77 million in 1999 to almost \$1 billion in 2009. Since economic growth is crucial for the CPP's legitimacy, Cambodia concurrently implemented economic pragmatism as a profit-maximization measure in its hedging between China and the United States that did not fluctuate according to elections.

Second, military relations gradually matured. Cambodia's accommodation of the War on Terror encouraged the Bush administration to return the favors by lifting the ban on military aid imposed in 1997 and by providing military aid to strengthen capacities of the RCAF in areas of counterterrorism, maritime security, and border control. The United States also made modest

logistical donations of equipment and provided language and counterterrorism training for RCAF personnel. Engagement broadened further following the first docking of a U.S. Navy vessels in 2007 and exchange visits between senior Cambodian and U.S. military officials. While these happened, the RGC also improved its military ties with Beijing in order to seek more military assistance, to balance its engagement with the U.S., and to avoid choosing a side. This behavior is parallel with the logic of indirect balancing in hedging. The essence of Cambodia's indirect balancing is that it forged military ties with both the United States and China, but it did not, and must not, do so through formal treat alliance in order to strengthen self-defense, to maintain a middle path between the two powers, and to safeguard strategic autonomy.

Finally, the most fluctuation can be seen in political relations, as the hypothesis predicts. The 1997 event in Cambodia kickstarted the slow demise of the royalist FUNCINPEC and elevated the CPP's relations with the CCP to the center stage. China legitimized the reconstituted government and backed Hun Sen internationally. In return, Cambodia became one of the strictest enforcers of the "One China" policy by closing down TECO and banning Taiwanese presence in Cambodia. The kingdom also stood with China on the international stage during events such as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the U.S. and the EP-3 Incident. The ties were mutually beneficial because each side saw the other as reinforcing its credibility at home and abroad. Both of them almost wholly disregarded issues of human rights and democracy. Therefore, even though Cambodia went through two elections in 2003 and 2008, its political ties with China remained unshakable, deepening over time as a result of limited bandwagoning with Beijing.

On the other hand, the 1997 crisis created a long-lasting detrimental effect on Cambodia's ties with the United States, which suspended direct civilian and military aid. Restriction began to ease gradually only during George W. Bush's first term because Cambodia accommodated the

War on Terror by strengthening its law enforcement, taking a hardline position against Islamic fundamentalist networks involved in the 2002 Bali bombings, exempting U.S. citizens from the ICC's jurisdiction, and easing its grip on democracy at home. For these reasons, the Bush administration adopted a non-confrontational stance with Cambodia's human rights records. Nevertheless, bilateral ties were not free of political rhetoric because, in contrast to the White House, the U.S. Congress maintained a bipartisan and hardline position by criticizing the RGC's clampdowns on opposition lawmakers and dissenters during the 2003 and 2008 elections. It is critical to note here that fluctuation in U.S.-Cambodian political relations during this period were largely rhetorical and did not result in any substantial disruption in government-to-government engagement. Moreover, instability in ties occurred after the general elections, not before.

To summarize, in its default condition, maintaining a balance between the United States and China dictates Cambodia's hedging foreign policy from 1999 to 2008. Around general election time, the RGC's limited bandwagoning with China either stays stable or grows closer, but political ties with the United States deteriorate temporarily due to its suppression of opposition. Once the ruling CPP wins the election, the country tries to repair the damage done with Washington by releasing jailed opponents and perpetuating a mirage of liberal democracy. This pattern of behaviors repeats every general election cycle, as we will observe in the following section.

3.2 Hedging Amid Growing Uncertainties, 2009-2019

Internal Challenges

Heading into the second decade of the twenty-first century, Cambodia faced several domestic challenges, both old and new. The first was corruption. Cambodia is one of the most corrupt countries on the globe, and it is the worst in this respect among the ten ASEAN states, according to the recent Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International

(2020). It was ranked 162 out of 180 countries with an integrity score of 20 out of 100 points. Corruption has been so widespread and chronic that it has been among the primary concerns of the population. Based on public opinion polls in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2013 conducted by IRI, an average of 40% of Cambodians blamed corruption for turning the country in the wrong direction (IRI 2007, 2008b, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014). The judiciary and law enforcement are the two most corrupt bodies -- laws exist on paper but are not adequately enforced, leaving public integrity to peril (Transparency International Cambodia 2014). Public officials use their power to benefit from bribes and to contribute back to the CPP for job security. While people at the top enjoy their handsome sums, low salaries leave underpaid police officers and public-school teachers no choice but to take bribes for ill-conceived traffic tickets and from the exclusive sale of classroom materials to privileged students, respectively. That is because in a developing country where corruption is so rampant, having enough food on the table is more vital than maintaining ethical values for some of these people than is maintaining ethical values.

Another challenge is the maintenance of GDP growth. Economic growth and domestic stability are core pillars of the CPP's legitimacy. As long as these two conditions remain stable, the CPP will continue to enjoy the support from low-income rural voters and some segments of middle-class voters. From 1998 to 2018, according to the World Bank (2019), the kingdom was one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with an eight percent average annual GDP growth, thanks mainly to its booming textile, tourism, and foreign investment sectors. As indicated in Table 3.5, between 2009 and 2018, Cambodia's GDP grew more than twofold, from \$10.40 billion to \$25.54 billion. In the meantime, GDP per capita rose substantially from \$738.06 to \$1,510.33. Cambodia aspires to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050.

Table 3.5 Cambodia's GDP and ODA inflow, 2009-2019 (Source: World Development Indicators)

Year	GDP (current \$ billion)	GDP per capita (current \$)	Annual GDP growth (%)	Net ODA received (current \$ million)	Net ODA received (% of government expense)
2009	10.40	738.06	0.08	710.96	62.33
2010	11.24	785.50	5.96	733.98	61.40
2011	12.83	882.28	7.07	792.43	55.89
2012	14.05	950.88	7.31	807.69	54.35
2013	15.23	1,013.42	7.36	808.21	44.75
2014	16.70	1,093.50	7.14	802.68	38.79
2015	18.05	1,162.90	7.03	679.04	31.23
2016	20.16	1,278.90	7.03	728.41	27.82
2017	22.18	1,388.46	7.01	842.93	26.59
2018	25.54	1,510.33	7.50	N/A	N/A
2019	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

The main hurdle for the Cambodian economy goes beyond its lack of a highly skilled workforce and infrastructures. It also includes the weakness of public institutions and the narrowness of its export sectors, which has been concentrating mainly on the garment and footwear industries. According to Heng (2018b), to compete with its peers in the region, Cambodia needs to enhance the technical skills and the general education of its workforce and to diversify exported products to include goods that capture higher added value such as machinery, bicycles, sugar, and palm oil. Despite Cambodia's consistently strong economic performance, the problem of poverty and income inequality remained; the number of people living under the national poverty line still stood at 13.5% in 2014, and 70% of the total population survived on less than \$3 per day in 2018 (Sim 2018; Sok 2018). Meanwhile, rural households made only 60% of the average income of urban families (Hansen and Gjonbalaj 2019). Another problem is that Cambodia remained an aid-dependent state, receiving more than a quarter of its annual budget from aid by the end of 2017.

Economic growth is a double-edged sword for the incumbent CPP because higher income means that the population has broader and better access to information, smart devices, and the Internet, enabling them to air grievances and to demand accountability, political participation, and governmental reforms. The party no longer had tight control over the flow of information broadcast through mainstream outlets owned by its allies. Surging usage of social media and mobile phones is a case in point. In 2013 alone, 1,100 new Cambodian Facebook accounts were added daily with an average of one new registrant every two minutes (de Carteret 2013). Meanwhile, the total number of mobile phone subscribers stood at 20.2 million in 2014, and 96% and 48% of Cambodians had a mobile phone and a smartphone by December 2016, respectively (Ben 2014; Phong et al. 2016). The number of Internet-using citizens increased steeply from 320,190 in 2010 to 1.68 million in 2011, 3.8 million in 2014, and 8.8 million in 2019, which is more than half of the country's population (Ang 2019; Ben 2014). Also, some 89% of Khmer Facebook users are 35 years old or younger, meaning millennials are the most digitally connected demographic.

Social media enables Cambodian electorates to access sensitive news not broadcast through mainstream media such as cases of land grabbing, deforestation, human rights abuses, corruption, and other forms of social injustices perpetrated by public officials and the CPP elites. According to Phong et al. (2016), the Internet became the most vital source of information for the general public, surpassing both TV and radio in popularity in 2016. It also gave a platform to opposition leaders such as Sam Rainsy, who had not had fair access to the mainstream media, to reach out directly to their bases of support and to galvanize new supporters, especially those who had been economically, socially, or politically marginalized by the state. The CNRP's mass mobilization of worker protests demanding higher wages and the party's significant gains in the 2013 election are examples of how social media could level the playing field against the CPP.

The CPP's popularity has gradually shrunk among voters. One public opinion poll in November 2013 indicated that only 55% of Cambodian people believe that the country was on the right track, and they blamed corruption, environmental degradation, inflation, and land grabbing as the main culprits (IRI 2014). This poll reflected the CPP's lowest approval rating since 2006. Between 2009 and 2017, the most prominent external threat to its power was the emergence of the CNRP. Campaigning on platforms of "rescuing" the country from Hun Sen's authoritarianism, enabling higher wages, providing a universal basic income for seniors, pushing reforms, and mobilizing anti-corruption efforts, the CNRP tapped into simmering grievances among voters and won 55 seats, slashing the CPP's control in the parliament from 90 to only 68 seats.

Aside from its vigorous use of the Internet and social media, two additional factors contributed to the CNRP's rise and the surging unpopularity of the CPP. First, controversial incidences of land grabbing against poor communities by the CPP oligarchs stirred contention among voters. For example, about 770,000 people were affected by various sorts of land disputes from 2000 to 2014 (Tang and Prak 2017). The most infamous case was the forced eviction of locals from the Boeung Kak lake in Phnom Penh. In 2007, the RGC granted 99-year development rights of the 133-hectare lake in central Phnom Penh to Shukaku Inc, a development conglomerate owned by CPP Senator Lao Meng Khin, at a "throwaway price" of \$79 million, although the estimated market value of the lake, once developed, may have been as high as \$1.3 billion or even more (Baliga and Khouth 2017; Strangio 2014). The eviction sparked demonstrations, imprisonments, and adverse reactions from the press, human rights groups, and several Western democracies.

Second, changes in voter demography propelled millennial voters to become the essential constituents in the Cambodian elections. For instance, 3.5 million out of 9 million registered voters in the 2013 general election were between 18 and 30 years old (Ponniah 2013). More than 1.5

million of them were voting for the first time. The landslide victory in 2008 bolstered the CPP's confidence and encouraged it to loosen its grip on critical news outlets such as *The Phnom Penh Post* and *The Cambodia Daily* as well as radio stations such as *Voice of America* (VOA), *Radio Free Asia* (RFA), *Beehive Radio*, and *Voice of Democracy*, all of which ran stories about cases of human rights abuses and corruption to a broad segment of Cambodia. After the 2013 election, nobody learned about what the weakening control over the media could mean for the ruling party better than the ruling party itself.

Inside the CPP, Hun Sen's position appeared more potent than ever after he took over the Party's presidency in 2015 and began stacking its Central Committee with loyal allies (Mech 2018a). However, the watershed moment in 2013 dealt a severe blow to the elite group's confidence in him as his inner circle began searching for an exit plan from Cambodia in case of a leadership change (Baldwin and Marshall 2019). Hun Sen would likely pass the baton of leadership to his eldest son, Lieutenant General Hun Manet (Hutt 2019b). A West Point graduate with a doctorate in economics from the University of Bristol, Manet currently serves as deputy Commander-in-Chief of the RCAF, and as Commander of the army, and he sits on the CPP's elite Permanent Committee. In recent years, he had taken on more active public roles by attending graduation ceremonies, inaugurating schools, visiting the CPP's rural bases, and establishing contacts with foreign military officials. The main challenge in Manet's succession would be to ensure that the elite elements within the CPP threw their support behind his candidacy if his father stepped down as prime minister for any reason in the future.

Finally, Cambodian democracy has deteriorated in recent years. According to the Freedom House, the country consistently ranked as a "not free" country, having a 5.5 freedom rating from

2008 to 2019.²⁰ Since 2013, the RGC has suppressed opposition parties, free press, civil society, and dissenters. For instance, the National Assembly passed a series of restrictive measures such as the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organization (LANGO), an amendment to Article 45 of the Law on Political Parties, and a new *lese majeste* provision into the penal code.

External Challenges

First and foremost, Cambodia's shared borders with Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos continued to pose serious threats to its security. In late 2008, as Deth (2014) aptly notes, Cambodia became a victim of Thailand's internal power struggle. After the RGC enlisted the Preah Vihear temple as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, two Thai opposition parties – the Democratic Party and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) – stoked nationalist sentiment by pressuring Bangkok to take a harder stance against the claim. Following the ascent of Abhisit Vejjajiva as prime minister in Thailand, tension rose when Bangkok mobilized troops near Preah Vihear, prompting a similar response from Phnom Penh. Military tension accelerated, and there were sporadic armed clashes into 2011, killing more than a dozen Khmer and Thai soldiers. Tension eased only after the July 2011 election of Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who shares warm personal and political ties with Hun Sen.

On its eastern borders, Cambodia saw its relations with Vietnam sour due to prolonged issues with the demarcation of lines of control over contested territory. Between 2013 and 2016, the RGC sent nearly two dozen diplomatic protest notes to Hanoi to complain about the latter's illegal constructions of ponds, roads, and army outposts near contested “no-man zones” in Kandal, Rattanakiri, and Svay Rieng provinces (Kry and Chy 2017; Leng 2017). The issue of illegal

²⁰ The Freedom House ranks a country's level of freedom between 1 (most free) and 7 (least free).

Vietnamese immigrants living in Cambodia is another thorny topic that had dogged Hun Sen for years. Since 2013, he began taking a stricter stance on Vietnamese immigrants by deporting 11,195 between 2014 and August 2018 (Voun 2018). Likewise, disputed borders with Laos led to armed standoffs in 2017 and 2019.

The second issue involved relations with ASEAN. As chairman of the ASEAN summit in 2012, Cambodia was under unprecedented pressure from both China and fellow member states concerning the South China Sea dispute. The kingdom needed to preserve warm relations with the PRC, which was arguably the most prominent economic and political backer of the CPP. Cambodia also could not jeopardize its ties with ASEAN claimant states such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia, for it would be harmful not only for its economy and its position in this regional bloc but also for its ties with the United States.

Bilaterally speaking, deepening relations with China had created some negative effects in Cambodia. The rapid influx of investments and immigrants from China increased the number of criminal activities perpetrated by Chinese nationals. Between 2014 and 2019, the RGC has deported 2,700 alleged Chinese fugitives (Kann 2019). The most well-known example of the effects of Chinese money is in the coastal province of Sihanoukville, which has dramatically transformed from a beach town to a *de facto* Chinese colony and casino capital. Also, an influx of Chinese investments has stoked corruption, and inadequate inspection of Chinese-owned construction projects led to deadly collapses of buildings killing more than 60 workers and injuring dozens of others (Farrer 2019; Kijewski 2020). Moreover, Khmer-owned businesses in Sihanoukville were either bought out or forced to go bankrupt by deep-pocketed Chinese spenders who monopolized 90% of the commercial activities (Hin 2019b; Po and Heng 2019). To protect its interests, Beijing interfered in the 2018 Cambodian general election by orchestrating a cyber

espionage campaign against the Cambodian National Election Committee, the Ministry of Interior, diplomats, human rights activists, and opposition lawmakers (Seiff 2018).

Cambodia's growing economic dependence on China is another concern. As of June 2019, Cambodia's public external debt²¹ stood at \$7.27 billion or 21.3% of its total GDP (Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance 2019). Around 39.55% of this sum was owed to the PRC alone. Experts have warned about debt-trap diplomacy, wherein Beijing uses financial inducement as a tool to coerce indebted borrowers to lease strategic facilities such as a deep-water port or air hub in exchange for debt alleviation. Beijing's no-strings-attached aid has exacerbated corruption and abuse of power among government officials, enabling the CPP to insulate itself from Western pressure and to become increasingly authoritarian. In addition to social repercussions, Cambodia's global reputation has also suffered. Scholars have labeled Cambodia as China's client state or as an extension of Chinese foreign policy, and its bid for non-permanent membership on the UN Security Council in 2012 fell short due to concerns about its dismal human rights records (Ciorciari 2015; Hutt 2016). Cambodia came under global scrutiny following reports accusing it of allowing Chinese military outposts in Sihanoukville and Koh Kong (Cochrane 2020; Page et al. 2019).

Correspondingly, Cambodia's diplomatic relations with the United States has plummeted to its lowest point since the early 1990s. One of the causes is the lingering issue of the \$500 million debt owed by Cambodia to the United States. The original loan of \$276 million occurred under the military regime of General Lon Nol from 1970 to 1975 when Washington supplied Phnom Penh with agricultural aid to help its fight against the Khmer Rouge and Viet Cong. Despite the RGC's multiple pleas for lower interest rates or a debt swap deal similar to the one made with Vietnam,

²¹ The Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance (2019) defines public external debt as concessional loans provided to Cambodia by bilateral and multilateral external development partners.

the debt had accrued without settlement since the 1970s, leaving total interest to grow as high as the principal amount (Bower 2010). For Hun Sen, this debt is a blood-stained loan that reminds him of U.S. war legacies such as its aerial bombardment, which killed many people and played a role in the rise of the Khmer Rouge (Kiernan and Owen 2015). “They brought bombs and dropped them on Cambodia and [now] demand Cambodian people to pay,” Hun Sen once remarked (Chheang 2017a).

Another disagreement involves the deportations of Cambodian nationals, who had fled the civil war in the 1970s when young age and had settled in the United States. They were convicted of various felony crimes. The RGC argued that these individuals had already served sentences in U.S. prisons and that it would be double punishment for them to be sent away permanently from their families in the United States to a country they barely know and whose language they do not even speak. Yet Washington has deported more than 700 Khmer refugees back to Cambodia since 2002 (Dunst 2019c). In the first two years of the Trump administration, deportation increased by 279%, and there were 1,855 more waiting to be deported to Cambodia by 2019 (Dunst 2019a). Following Cambodia’s refusal to continue this repatriation program, the U.S. government slapped limited visa sanctions on its foreign ministry officials (Boyle and Kann 2018). Finally, deepening ties with China and the deterioration of democracy and human rights contributed to more friction with the United States from 2009 to 2019.

Finally, the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China posed a great challenge to Cambodia’s foreign policy as a small state. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the PRC has adopted an assertive posture around the world with political and economic tentacles stretching across every region. One example is the establishment of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, a massive infrastructure project aimed at constructing railways, pipelines,

highways, and canals connecting Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. This grand project poses geostrategic, geoeconomics, and geopolitical impediments on Washington's global power (Cavanna 2019). According to Elizabeth Economy (2014, 2018), this is part of Xi's plan to rejuvenate the Chinese state as the Middle Kingdom with world affairs revolving around its peripheries. The old days of Deng Xiaoping's "hide your strength, bide your time" are long past because Xi's China has opted for an "activist" foreign policy to try to shape the world to its liking (Harshaw 2018). The emergence of a globally assertive China has collided with the United States' "pivot" to Asia and FOIP. The tension between the two powers has slowly morphed into a geopolitical contest that concerns small Asian states, pushing them to hedge their bets. As each side had taken more aggressive steps to try to offset the other's influence, the stakes were even higher for Cambodia, which is a small and weak state. The CPP government has to carefully weigh between the costs and benefits attached to ties with each power and balance them against internal and external pressure facing its external security and domestic legitimacy.

3.2.1 Chinese-Cambodian Relations: A De Facto Diplomatic Ally?

Political Ties

From 2009 to 2019, Cambodia continued its limited bandwagoning with China in exchange for strengthened political ties. One of the most symbolic accommodations was its deportation of 20 Uighur asylum seekers in December 2009. As a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, Cambodia was supposed to assess their cases and prevent any repatriations that would expose them to persecution by their country of origin. Pressured by Beijing, Phnom Penh caved in and repatriated 20 Uighurs to the PRC despite interventions by UN and U.S. officials (Strangio 2014). Their removals took place ahead of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping's planned official state visit the following day. In another example, when critics claimed that constructions

of Chinese dams in the Mekong River basin would suppress water level and disrupt fishery ecology for adjacent countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia itself, the RGC downplayed these fears and instructed its officials to avoid complaining about China's activities in regional forums (Ciorciari 2015). In 2010, during Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the kingdom, the two countries upgraded their bilateral ties to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation," which is the highest form of diplomatic relations Cambodia accords to a foreign country (Thayer 2013a). There were several other agreements aimed at enhancing cooperation in finance, investment, communication, energy security, and shared interests in multilateral forums.

Nothing demonstrated Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with China better than the position it took during the ASEAN summit in 2012. As chairman, it blocked fellow member states who are claimants in the South China Sea dispute – the Philippines and Vietnam – from pushing for a unified message directing at China's violation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Citing "lack of consensus" and provocative language as justifications, it torpedoed Manila's and Hanoi's proposals and reportedly leaked the draft statements to Beijing (Ciorciari 2015).²² As a result, the summit ended without a joint communiqué for the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history. Later that year, Cambodia doubled down on its support for China by deliberately claiming that ASEAN had agreed not to internationalize the South China Sea issue, although the Philippines said otherwise. The debacle invited sharp criticisms accusing the RGC of doing Beijing's bidding or serving as a spoiler.

Two factors explain Cambodia's deference to China during the summit. First, the next general election would be held in July 2013, and it would be the most contested vote to date

²² Vietnam and the Philippines lobbied to include a statement mentioning the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and tension with China at the Scarborough Shoal into ASEAN's joint communiqué, respectively.

because the main opposition CNRP was surging significantly among urban voters. Since any restriction on democracy at home would certainly invite Western condemnation, the CPP needed Beijing's backing in the international arena to legitimize the electoral process and to rally its winning coalition and give them more peace of mind. Another reason for Cambodia's accommodation is that the Chinese consider the South China Sea as a core interest, and the summit was an opportunity for Cambodia to repay Chinese assistance lavished on it over the past decade and to secure future support from the PRC.

The general election on July 28, 2013, was a watershed moment because the CPP faced its most formidable opponent since FUNCINPEC. As dusk was settling over Phnom Penh, preliminary results came showing that the CPP had lost 22 seats – down from 90 in 2008 to only 68. Meanwhile, the CNRP had captured 55 seats. The CPP's poor performance was a clear sign of its declining popularity. As Strangio (2014) puts it, the ruling party's formula of posing as having brought "liberation" from the Khmer Rouge genocide and as bringing internal stability along with economic development had gradually lost its appeal with post-civil war millennials. The result was a red line for the CPP's tolerance for opposition. It became clear that a competitive election bore the imminent risk, threatening the CPP's power and that of its winning coalition. Therefore, tightening its grip on democracy was the only way to safeguard the status quo, and that was what the CPP would do over the next five years.

Although the CPP retained enough seats to form a new government unilaterally, the outcomes testified to its declining popularity. Despite this poor performance, China stood behind the CPP by endorsing the results of the election and signaling that it would continue to help Cambodia block "foreign disturbance" (Kung 2014). Behind the public face, as Ciorciari (2014)

explains, both the CPP and the CCP began reevaluating their ties because the aftermath of the election aftermath triggered political gridlock due to boycotts by CNRP legislators.

From 2014 to the end of 2019, Cambodia's political relations with China deepened further as Cambodia continued to bandwagon with China's position in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan. For instance, the RGC repeatedly rejected Taiwanese requests to establish a consulate on its territory and went so far as to deport accused Taiwanese nationals to the PRC instead of Taiwan to reiterate its unshakable commitment to the "One China" policy (Aspinwall 2018; Khuon 2019b). Given Taiwan's considerable influence in Cambodia's garment and other trade-related sectors, this was a significant risk (Hutt 2019c). When Vietnam and the Philippines advocated that the South China Sea dispute should be negotiated multilaterally between ASEAN claimants and China, Cambodia mimicked Beijing's talking point, saying that ASEAN is not a court and that the issue should be resolved bilaterally (O'Neill 2018). When the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines in July 2016, Cambodia backed China's rejection of that ruling, declaring that the decision was "the worst political collusion in the framework of international politics" (China Daily 2016). In that very same year, Cambodia blocked an attempt to include the PCA ruling into the ASEAN communiqué during a summit in Laos (Mogato et al. 2016). During his meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Hun Sen warned against the internationalization of the South China Sea, arguing that the world "should not take gasoline to douse on fire" (O'Neill 2018). Moreover, the RGC supported all "necessary measures" taken by the Beijing government in response to the pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong (MFAIC 2019).

The intensity of government suppression of democracy during the 2018 election season shed light on the CPP's grave concern about the stability of its rule, although political intimidation had been part of Cambodia's electoral dynamics since the civil war ended in the early 1990s. Its

near-loss performance five years earlier had put the party on severe alert about a possible defeat. If the CNRP was allowed to compete openly in the polling again, there was a chance that the CPP might lose the election. To protect the status quo, something had to be done to marginalize the leading opposition group and its supporters politically.

In 2015, the Phnom Penh Municipal Court issued an arrest warrant for CNRP President Sam Rainsy on a defamation charge, even though the same charge had been brought against him by Deputy Prime Minister Hor Namhong since 2008. To avoid the arrest, Rainsy fled into exile once again, leaving the CNRP and its new leader, Kem Sokha, in disarray. In that same year, the CPP-controlled National Assembly passed LANGO to allow tighter government control on civil society groups and NGOs. The law also empowered the state to shut down any organizations deemed as jeopardizing national security and any foreign entities that fail to register at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

The last straws came in late 2017 when the RGC expelled the National Democratic Institute (NDI), citing its violation of LANGO (Kann 2017). Then, two local radio stations that sold airtimes to RFA and VOA had their licenses revoked. The U.S. government funds NDI, RFA, and VOA. Next, in the early hours of September 3, CNRP President Kem Sokha was arrested in a midnight raid and charged with attempting to set up a “color revolution” against the incumbent government. One day later, *The Cambodia Daily*, one of the two hard-hit English newspapers, was shut down due to its inability to pay an unanticipated \$6.3 million tax bill (Westerman 2017). In mid-November, the Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP and banned its 118 members from politics for five years based on an accusation that they colluded with the United States to try to topple Hun Sen. While the international community was still chanting the “death of democracy in Cambodia,”

the election on July 28, 2018, handed all 125 parliamentary seats to the CPP. Cambodia transformed into a “closed autocracy” (Levitsky and Way 2020).

Compared to what happened during previous election cycles, the vote in 2018 was a more challenging litmus test for Sino-Cambodian ties. The message was clear. The CPP had to win to retain the status quo, whereas Beijing needed the CPP to win to secure its economic and political interests. Even so, Cambodia now needed China much more than ever before because the dissolution of the CNRP prompted the United States and the EU to impose punitive economic and political sanctions. At the same time that the Western community sharply criticized the grave damage done to democracy, China stood firmly behind Cambodia, suggesting that the 2018 election will be “fair,” although no credible opposition was permitted to compete openly against the CPP (Martina 2018). When Western democracies withdrew their support for the electoral process, China provided \$20 million worth of polling booths, laptops, and essentials stationery to Cambodia’s National Election Commission (NEC) (Chandran 2018). Beside logistical assistance, according to one Reuters report, the Chinese ambassador to Cambodia, Xiong Bo, took a bold step by participating in a CPP rally, leading one regional expert to argue that 2013 had been “unsettling” for China and that Beijing sought “stability” this time around (Allard and Prak 2018). When the United States and the EU refused to send their electoral observers, China and other autocratic regimes such as Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, Russia dispatched what Morgenbesser (2019) calls “zombie” monitors to justify the flawed election that the CPP ran essentially uncontested.

After the election, the RGC continued to bandwagon with China, but the degree of its accommodation became even stronger than before, as Cambodia’s relations with the United States plummeted to the lowest point in recent memory. For instance, Cambodian leaders, including King Norodom Sihamoni, expressed support for the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative (Hul 2019).

Cambodia is also a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was founded in December 2015. AIIB has raised questions among some analysts as to whether it is part of China's global strategy to compete with the U.S.-dominated World Bank and the Japanese-led Asian Development Bank (Runde et al. 2015; Weiss 2017). In addition, Cambodia openly welcomed a massive influx of Chinese investments. As explained earlier, the best example of how Chinese money impacted Cambodia is the case of Sihanoukville province. Before capital began to flow in from the Chinese mainland, Sihanoukville had been packed with Western backpackers and local tourists. It had a population of 150,000. That began to change in the early 2010s. According to Po and Heng (2019), PRC-backed companies invested \$1 billion of capital every year from 2013 to 2017, most of it concentrated in the casino, real estate, and entertainment sectors. Between 2016 and 2017, investments almost doubled from \$3.6 billion to \$6.3 billion, as the number of casinos skyrocketed to over 100 establishments, leading the media to dub Sihanoukville as "Macau 2."

During the 2017-2018 period, the number of new Chinese arrivals in Sihanoukville doubled from 100,000 to 210,000, outnumbering the local population who came to feel like strangers in their lands (Soth 2018). As the influx of cash and workers accelerated, so did corruption, money laundering, prostitution, online fraud, homicide, violent assault, and kidnapping perpetrated by Chinese nationals (Ellis-Petersen 2018; Khidhir 2019; Nachemson and Kong 2019; Taing 2018). Between 2011 and 2017, Cambodia deported 1,133 Chinese hackers for telecommunication frauds (Taing 2018). Chinese companies were also involved in land grabbing cases affecting 20,000 families in Sihanoukville (Hul 2018a). Meanwhile, reckless usage of the Khmer language seen in billboards of Chinese-run businesses stirred contention among locals. As negative impacts of Chinese investments began to surface in the local and international press, Hun Sen hit back at those

who criticized these adverse effects, citing contributions made to the national economy and calling critics “racist” and “jealous” of China (Ben 2019; Neou and Kann 2018).

The pieces of evidence discussed above further reinforces the hypothesis that the 2013 and 2018 general elections in Cambodia did not cause its political relations with China to fluctuate. In contrast, diplomatic ties matured and expanded in scope and intensity over time because the kingdom implemented limited bandwagoning with the PRC’s core interests, such as the Taiwan issue and the South China Sea dispute. The RGC also welcomed an influx of Chinese investment and immigrants, regardless of some negative impacts made on the local population. For its part, China continued to back the ruling CPP internationally, even though the latter had its worst electoral performance in 2013. Despite a heavy crackdown on the CNRP, following the 2013 election, China stood behind the CPP to protect its interests. Due to the mutually beneficial nature of their ties, Sino-Cambodia political relations experienced only maturity and stability through the 2013 and 2018 elections, which are clear evidence supporting the central argument of this thesis.

Economic Ties

Similar to what happened in the political realm, economic relations strengthened as China became the biggest aid donor and investor in Cambodia despite political uncertainties and tension created by the 2013 and 2018 elections. After the RGC deported 20 Uighur asylum seekers in December 2009, China announced \$1.2 billion in grants and loans, including 14 separate bilateral agreements (Thayer 2012). That same year, China became the biggest donor to the World Bank-led multilateral fund for Cambodian reconstruction with a total pledge of \$257 million, surpassing the United States, the EU, and Japan (Heng 2012). When Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Cambodia in 2012, he offered \$70 million and \$430 million in aid and loans, respectively. After

Cambodia blocked statements made by the Philippines and Vietnam on the South China Sea at the 2012 ASEAN summit, Beijing stepped in with \$500 million in soft loans and grants (Prak 2012).

In 2013, Hun Sen came back from Beijing with \$548 million of infrastructure grants. Three years later, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced \$237 million in soft loans and canceled \$89 million of debt (Lin 2018; Prak 2013b). Following Cambodia's support for its rejection of the ruling by the PCA in July 2016, the PRC gave \$600 million in aid and sponsored the construction of a 12-story administrative building for the Cambodian National Assembly (Hunt 2016). Between 1996 and 2016, China had channeled about \$15 billion in aid to Cambodia, and by 2017, according to Heng (2018a), it had sponsored the construction of 2,000 kilometers of roads and seven bridges. From 2018 to 2019, the two countries sealed 19 aid and investment agreements within a \$588 million aid package for the 2019-2021 period (Prak 2018; Prak 2019b). It is hard to deny that the People's Republic was more generous to Cambodia than the United States when it came to bilateral aid. Moreover, China's assistance did not place strict conditions concerning human rights and democracy. This financial support played a fundamental role in bolstering the CPP's ability to develop infrastructures in rural regions where its core constituents live. In return, as noted earlier, China expected to see the recipient state accommodating the "One China" policy and its other positions around the world.

By the end of 2011, Chinese investment in Cambodia amounted to \$8.9 billion and spread across 317 projects (Thayer 2012). Since 1994, China had poured in \$12.6 billion in investment, and it became the largest FDI source with accumulated funds of \$5.3 billion or about \$1 billion annually from 2013 to 2017 (Hin 2019a; Nachemson 2019a). The annual inflow of Chinese FDI reached \$3.59 billion at the end of 2018 and concentrated in sectors such as real estate development, textiles, infrastructure, mining, and agriculture. In the energy sector alone, China

was the biggest investor with a capital of \$11.5 billion invested in seven large-scale hydropower and coal-fired powerplant, which have severe effects on the environment, protected lands and animals, and local Khmer communities (Chheang 2017b; Heng 2018a). Meanwhile, the two-way trade grew substantially. While Cambodian exports to China increased from \$16.33 million in 2009 to almost 1 billion in 2018, Chinese imports spiked by nearly eightfold from \$881 million to \$6.7 billion in 2018. Similar to the 1999-2008 period, Cambodia continued to deal with a growing trade deficit with China, which rose from \$864.95 million in 2009 to \$5.77 billion in 2018.

Table 3.6 Cambodia's Trade with China, 2009-2019 [*Source: International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics (data.imf.org)*]

Year	Exports to (mainland) China (\$ million)	Imports from (mainland) China (\$ million)	Trade Balance (\$ million)
2009	16.33	881.28	-864.95
2010	65.02	1,184.71	-1,119.69
2011	154.54	1,738.30	-1,583.76
2012	182.88	2,161.72	-1,978.84
2013	280.38	3,002.46	-2,722.08
2014	356.60	3,710.09	-3,353.49
2015	405.52	3,926.20	-3,520.68
2016	609.28	4,550.95	-3,941.67
2017	745.35	5,494.86	-4,749.51
2018	982.99	6,761.45	-5,778.46
2019	N/A	N/A	N/A

Tourism is another area dominated by China. For instance, among 6.2 million foreign tourists visiting Cambodia in 2018, two million were Chinese (Sorn 2019). In the first ten months of 2019 alone, 2.03 million people from the PRC visited the kingdom, indicating a 24.4% year-on-year increase (Lipes 2019). According to one estimate, Chinese travelers brought about \$700 million to the Cambodian economy in 2017 (Heng 2018a). The rising number of visitors from the PRC, however, does not always translate into more income for the local population because many visitors spend their money at places run by their fellow Chinese people. As the head of one

Cambodian tourism association said, “They eat meals at Chinese restaurants then go to shop at Chinese stores. Tourists from Western countries, on the other hand, always take taxis and buy things at Khmer markets” (Lipes 2019). This trend also occurs in Laos and Myanmar, where Chinese tourists are known as “Zero Dollar Tours.”

Cambodia’s economic relations with China from 2009 to 2019 expanded significantly through bilateral trade, aid, investment, and tourism. Though the kingdom had a \$5.77 billion trade deficit with China in 2018, its exports to the PRC grew exponentially from \$16.33 million in 2009 to \$982.99 million in 2018. That number, however, was minimal compared to how much products Cambodia sold to the United States over the same period. China was also the most significant donor and foreign investor in Cambodia, whose portfolio outnumbered other players such as Japan, the United States, and the EU. The high-stakes elections in 2013 and 2018 did not alter Cambodia’s persistent implementation of economic pragmatism in its hedging toward China, because the CPP needed to create jobs for ordinary citizens, produce rents for the elites, develop infrastructures, maintain social stability, and bolster economic growth in order to keep people satisfied.

Military Ties

Throughout the 2010s, Cambodia continued to implement indirect balancing toward China to continue modernizing and strengthening the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. This policy served four purposes. First, it improved the defensive and offensive capabilities of the RCAF in response to traditional threats posed by neighboring Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. Second, it was an indirect response to regional arms acquisitions made by fellow ASEAN states and growing geopolitical uncertainty created by the collision between the United States’ “pivot” to Asia and the FOIP and the rise of China’s military power. Third, indirect balancing with toward supplemented

modest defense assistance provided by Washington. Last, it improved the RGC's ability to maintain domestic order, stability, and security.

As of 2019, China was the most significant donor and supplier of military assistance to Cambodia. In December 2009, when Washington suspended the delivery of 200 military trucks to punish Phnom Penh for deporting 20 Uighur asylum seekers, Beijing stepped in with 257 trucks, 50,000 military uniforms, 1,000 handguns, and 50,000 bullets for its national police (Kung 2014). One year later, the PRC offered a loan of \$195 million for purchases of 12 Harbin Z-9 helicopters and training for two dozen pilots and mechanics (Thayer 2013b). Between 2012 and 2013, the Cambodian and Chinese defense ministries inked military deals totaling \$17 million. The agreements allowed China to train RCAF uniformed members, construct a Combined Arms Officer School and medical facilities, and provide additional training and equipment. In 2015, the PRC made a significant donation of heavy weaponry, including jeeps, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns, and spare parts (Aun 2015). Before and after the 2018 general election, it pledged a total of \$184 million to the RCAF's modernization program (Elmer 2018; Khuon 2019a). In July 2019, Cambodia announced the purchase of \$40 million of Chinese-made arms to replace old inventory and to bolster its army (Prak 2019a). Since 2009, about 200 RCAF cadets have been admitted to a four-year military education in Cambodia, which is overseen by Chinese military experts (Belford and Prak 2015). The program includes a six-month mandatory training in China.

Another area of growing cooperation had to do with a joint military exercise. In December 2016, the PLA and the RCAF conducted their first joint drill in Kampong Speu, which involved nearly 500 soldiers and 100 tanks and armored personnel carriers (Aun 2018). Since then, the "Golden Dragon" exercise has been conducted annually with a growing number of troops and weaponry involved. Its primary purposes included training for counterterrorism, peacekeeping

operation, humanitarian assistance, emergency engineering, and live combat action (Parameswaran 2020). Bilateral defense cooperation also extended to maritime security. For instance, the Royal Cambodian Navy conducted its first exercise with its Chinese counterpart in 2016 and entered into a negotiation to purchase two warships equipped with sophisticated missile systems (Khuon and Ford 2016). Cambodia's intention to upgrade its modest naval fleet has a connection not only with the tension in the South China Sea but also with the growing maritime capabilities of neighboring states, which have beefed up their fleets in recent years. While the United States continued to place strict conditions on military ties, Cambodia looked to China, among other countries, as an alternative supplier and partner.

Defense relationships strengthened at the highest level of government as well. In May 2010, General Pol Saroeun, Commander-in-Chief of the RCAF, met with General Chen Bingde, Chief of the General Staff of the PLA, to discuss military aid and human resource development for the RCAF. Four months later, Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Banh agreed to boost high-level communications and to expand the scope of security cooperation with his counterpart. After the two countries raised their ties to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation" in 2010, defense ties deepened further following the signing of a bilateral treaty to enhance cooperation to deal with illegal immigration, transnational crime, counterterrorism, arms proliferation, and human trafficking. Following border tension with Vietnam in 2015, General Banh led a top-ranking delegation consisting of 23 leaders of the RCAF for a five-day visit to China to seek more military assistance (Neou 2015).

Cambodia's deepening defense ties with China extended beyond conventional activities such as joint exercise, policy coordination, and exchange visits. The kingdom had granted development rights to Chinese-backed firms along with its coastal areas that have strategic and

military implications. For instance, in 2008, it approved a 99-year lease over a piece of land in Koh Kong province stretching over more than 45,000-hectare to a Chinese firm called the Union Development Group (UDG). Dubbed as “Dara Sakor,” the UDG worked to develop the \$3.8 billion project, which stretches over 20% of Cambodia’s total coastline, and, according to UDG, the aim is to build an entertainment resort with an airport that can accommodate up to 10 million passengers annually (Celera 2019). Skeptics had begun questioning whether Dara Sakor was a dual-use civilian-military project that might become a Chinese military base, even though the UDG claimed the project would serve only commercial purposes (Puy 2019). Satellite image, however, shows that the firm built a 3.4-kilometer runway similar to the one constructed on the Spratly Islands, making it longer than the average length generally recommended by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration for civilian aircraft such as the Boeing 747 and the Airbus A380.

According to Charles Edel (2019), when completed, the airstrip will be able to accommodate Chinese reconnaissance, bomber, and fighter aircraft and thus will allow Beijing to project power over adjacent waters next to Thailand and Vietnam and across the South China Sea through a “triangular perimeter” connecting its bases in the Spratly and Paracel Islands to Koh Kong. Speculations about Dara Sakor are not without merit because Cambodia had lately become more indebted to China. By June 2019, 39.55% of Cambodia’s \$7.27 billion public external borrowings were owed to the PRC (Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance 2019). What makes the project appear even more suspicious is that it is in a mostly remote jungle area that makes an unlikely tourist destination. Furthermore, it has been visited by senior officials from the Chinese Communist Party and the PLA (Cochrane 2020; Nachemson 2019b).

In mid-2019, another allegation emerged in Sihanoukville. Citing unnamed U.S. and allied sources, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on July 22 that Cambodia had signed a secret agreement

allowing China to use its Ream Naval Base for 30 years with automatic renewal every ten years after the end of the first period of agreement (Page et al. 2019). The claim was later backed up by U.S. Army Brigadier General Joel B. Vowell, Deputy Director for Strategic Planning and Policy of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, who said that construction of the Chinese outpost would begin in 2020 (Neou 2019). Speculation about China's activities at Ream caught the attention of U.S. officials after Cambodia at first requested U.S. assistance to upgrade the base in 2017 but then backtracked it two years later, prompting the Pentagon to seek a fuller explanation.

Following the *Wall Street Journal's* report, the RGC prepared a choreographed visit to Ream for journalists trying to convince them that there was no such thing as a Chinese base in Cambodia, while Hun Sen called the allegation "the worst fake news" made up against his country (Tum 2019). Although Cambodia's 1993 constitution prohibits foreign military bases in Cambodian soil, doubt still looms large over the RGC's denial because the ruling CPP currently controls all 125 seats in the National Assembly, making it more than possible to amend the constitution to accommodate the presence of the Chinese military, if necessary. If true, military outposts in Ream and Dara Sakor would add additional sticking points for U.S.-Cambodia relations. They may also antagonize fellow ASEAN members, who are increasingly worried about Chinese assertiveness in Asia.

Overall, we see evidence of Cambodia's indirect balancing toward China, in which it forged closer ties with the Chinese PLA through joint bilateral exercises, high-level visits between defense officials, and coordination on shared security interests. The PRC was the principal supplier and donor of military equipment to the RCAF, whose abilities and inventory remained relatively behind its neighbors in the region. As a small state with restrained economic resources, Cambodia benefited immensely from its non-alliance relations with China, because they empowered the

RCAF, supplemented logistical and operational assistance received from the United States, enabled the country to diversify its defense partnership and to avoid overt alignment with any one power. As the hypothesis argues, the 2013 and 2018 elections did not force Cambodia's indirect balancing toward China to fluctuate.

3.2.2 United States-Cambodian Relations: Tumultuous Years

Political Ties

Much as in 1999-2008, the status of U.S.-Cambodian political relations in the second decade of the 21st century can be categorized as strategically misaligned and plagued with a deficit in trust due to persistent issues of human rights and democracy (Cheunboran 2015; Deth et al. 2017). Bilateral cooperation stabilized and expanded in some practical areas of mutual interest, but disagreements on Cambodian domestic politics continued to deter deeper strategic engagement. Things started on a positive note when the first female U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia, Carol A. Rodley, began her tenure on January 20, 2009. The general election had been held the year prior, and the CPP's power became more potent than ever before, with overwhelming control of 90 out of a total of 123 seats in the National Assembly. The 2008 election dealt a severe blow to the opposition SRP. The GDP growth stood at nearly 7%, and income was rising steadily. People got to enjoy prolonged peace and stability for the first time after two decades of internal strife. The border clash with Thailand proved timely, coming not long before the July vote and moving many to rally behind Hun Sen as he responded to Thailand's provocation. Seeing that his platform was losing appeal, SRP leader Sam Rainsy reverted to his chauvinistic tactics of attacking the premier's past relations with Vietnam.

In October 2009, Rainsy stormed down to the southern border in Svay Rieng province, where he pulled out half a dozen wooden demarcation poles along the Vietnamese borders and

then produced a false map to accuse the government of losing territory to Hanoi (Strangio 2014). He was slapped with an 11-year jail sentence and forced into self-imposed exile again. The relationship between the United States and Cambodia hit another speedbump after the latter deported 20 Uighur asylum seekers to China. In response, U.S. lawmakers introduced the Cambodia Trade Act of 2010 (H.R. 5320) in November 2010, prohibiting the forgiveness of the Lon Nol-era war debt on which massive interest had accumulated without settlement since the 1970s (Thayer 2012). During her first visit to Phnom Penh that same month, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Cambodia that “you don’t want to get too dependent on any one country,” specifically targeting China (U.S. Department of State 2010).

To keep a balance between the United States and China, Cambodia, therefore, participated in the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), which eventually became a regional competitor to the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) grouping. Founded in 2009, LMI was part of President Barack Obama’s “pivot” to Asia aimed at leveling the playing field against China’s presence in the Lower Mekong Subregion. In 2010, the United States committed \$178 million to LMI’s funding, enabling it to address issues such as food security and water resources management in this particular part of Southeast Asia (Thayer 2012).

From 2010 to early 2012, bilateral relations were mostly stable because Cambodia adopted limited bandwagoning with the United States by joining the LMI, maintaining internal stability, improving education and public health, loosening its grip on critics, and adopting piecemeal reforms. It was in late 2012 that ties began to deteriorate. There was evidence of Cambodia’s distancing itself politically from the U.S. as it began to suppress domestic oppositions. During a meeting with Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong in Washington D.C in June 2012, Secretary Clinton pressed for the releases of 13 residents of Boeung Kak lake who had been

arrested the month before for protesting their forced eviction by a development firm of CPP Senator Lao Meng Khin (Worrell and Khout 2012).

On November 19, 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama flew to Cambodia from Myanmar to attend the U.S.-ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit, marking the first visit by a sitting U.S. leader. Dogged by concerns among human rights advocates, Obama had a brief and “tense” meeting with Hun Sen, in which he pressed hard on issues of human rights, releases of political prisoners, and a free and fair election (Spetalnick 2012). Even though the meeting was tense and ended without a joint press conference, Obama’s trip was arguably a big boost for the CPP’s legitimacy, because it showed that after more than 20 years under its leadership, Cambodia had made commendable progress in domestic and foreign policy and that it had earned recognition from various world leaders. Besides President Barack Obama, there were visits by several other prominent U.S. figures to Cambodia, such as Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in 2012, then-House Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and First Lady Michelle Obama in 2015, and Secretary of State John Kerry in 2016.

Two contentious issues strained U.S.-Cambodian relations before the 2013 election. The first one was the expulsions of 27 opposition legislators from the National Assembly, whereas the second involved CNRP’s exiled president Sam Rainsy, who had been disqualified from running for office by the NEC in late 2012. Pressured by the United States and the international community, Hun Sen, nine days before the election, paved the way for Rainsy’s pardon by the Cambodian king and allowed him to return home. For a brief period, the prospect of a democratic Cambodia did not look as bleak as some had argued it was. The reason was that the CPP had once again loosened its grip on democracy and allowed for a competitive election. Rainsy’s return fueled excitement in the opposition movement, as hundreds of thousands of factory workers, monks, labor unions,

students, urban voters, and marginalized groups who had been affected by corruption, land grabbing, and abuse of power by the ruling elites rallied behind the CNRP. The ruling party itself was concerned about a possible loss of control. However, it remained confident in its ability to win the hearts and minds of rural votes, where its entrenched patronage machines had long dominated local bureaucracies from village and commune to district and provincial levels since the 1990s. Whatever it was that the CPP expected, the actual outcomes of the election were not one of them.

In July 2013, the ruling CPP lost 22 seats in the National Assembly, having its portfolio slashed from 90 in 2008 to only 68. Meanwhile, the freshly minted CNRP captured 55 seats. This election had three implications for Cambodia and its foreign policy. First, it triggered another parliamentary logjam and posed a grave challenge to the CPP's domestic hegemony. For example, during the opening session of the 5th legislature, 55 elected CNRP legislators boycotted the ceremony to embarrass and delegitimize the ruling party (Prak 2013a). After one year of rhetoric, boycotts, and contentious negotiations, the two parties reached a power-sharing agreement in July 2014 that included three compromises. One, Sam Rainsy, who had not been disqualified from running for political office since 2012, would be able to take a seat in the Assembly. Two, CNRP deputy Kem Sokha would become the first Vice President of the parliament. Three, chairmanships of parliamentary commissions and the NEC would be equally shared between the CPP and the CNRP. The second implication of the deal was that the post-election impasse sparked nationwide protest against the CPP as thousands of people took to the streets to demand Hun Sen's resignation.

Third and more importantly, although the United States recognized the electoral result and applauded Cambodia for administering a more competitive vote, the election kick-started the beginning of a downward spiral in diplomatic relations between the two countries that persisted over the next six years. For the ruling party, the CNRP's stunning success would not have been

possible without a fifth column working behind the curtain to undermine its power. Due to its connections with Sam Rainsy, Kem Sokha, and local NGOs, no foreign country fit better as a scapegoat than the United States. As a result, Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with the U.S. had to be dialed back until after the political elimination of the CNRP.

In July 2015, the RGC began to systematically clampdown on the oppositions by passing LANGO. Then, in October, two CNRP parliamentarians were dragged out of their cars and severely beaten by protestors next to the National Assembly building. The subsequent investigation implicated three members of Hun Sen's elite bodyguard unit who were jailed for only one year before they were freed and promoted to the ranks of general and colonel (Ith 2017; Turton and Mech 2016). One month later, Kem Sokha was voted out as the first Vice President of the Assembly, while Sam Rainsy was hit with multiple lawsuits, had his parliamentary immunity revoked, and was forced into exile for the third time since 2008.²³ Between late 2015 and 2017, about 25 CNRP senators, lawmakers, and supporters were either imprisoned or forced to flee the country (LICADHO 2016; Lum 2018). Tension escalated after the RGC expelled the National Democratic Institute in September 2017. In connection with NDI, on September 2, CNRP President Kem Sokha was arrested for the "color revolution" attempt, accused of treason, and jailed without trial for over a year. The RGC then closed more than a dozen local radio stations and newspaper outlets, including *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Asia*, and *The Cambodia Daily*.

In response, U.S. Ambassador William A. Heidt rejected the allegations that his government was colluding with CNRP, calling them "baseless" and "classic red herrings" (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia 2017). By mid-November, the Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP. The tension grew worse when Cambodia suspended its cooperation in the 2002 deal that ensures the

²³ In February 2017, Sam Rainsy resigned as CNRP President and left the position to Kem Sokha.

repatriation of Khmer refugees. In retaliation, Washington imposed visa sanctions on Cambodia's foreign ministry officials and listed it as a "recalcitrant" country that impeded the United States' deportation effort (Lum 2019). To retaliate, the RGC suspended the U.S. search program aimed at recovering the remains of personnel missing-in-action (MIA) from the Southeast Asian War, and it also called for the expulsion of the Peace Corps.

Between November 2017 and December 2019, the Trump administration took a number of punitive measures against the RGC in the hope of deterring it from backsliding further into authoritarianism, countering Chinese influence, and discouraging its hostility toward the United States. In September 2017, the White House announced the suspension of \$1.8 million to assist with the Cambodian election process. Then U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) spearheaded a unanimous adoption of a Senate resolution (S. Res. 279) calling for the freezing of assets owned by all senior RGC officials and placing these individuals under the Specially Designated Nationals list (U.S. Senate 2017). In June 2018 and December 2019, the U.S. Department of the Treasury (2018, 2019) sanctioned three allies of Hun Sen, including the commander of his bodyguard unit, General Hing Bun Hieng, for human rights abuses under the Global Magnitsky Act. As of this writing, the U.S. Congress is considering at least three sanction bills.²⁴ While the United States was considering punitive actions, the EU, which is Cambodia's largest common market, had investigated whether to revoke the country's Everything-but-Arms (EBA) preferential trade status that has allowed it to export to the EU market without quotas and tariffs since 2001. Revocation of the EBA would hit hard at the garment sector, which accounts for 40% of annual GDP.²⁵

²⁴ The first two bills are the Cambodia Accountability and Return on Investment Act of 2019 (S. 1468) and the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2019 (H.R.526). They aim to freeze assets owned by RGC and RCAF officials implicated in undermining Cambodia's democracy. The bills also authorize educational funds for Internet contents in Cambodia about China's impediment of Cambodia's sovereignty. Meanwhile, the Cambodia Trade Act of 2019 (S. 34) requires a presidential report on the kingdom's duty-free status under GSP.

²⁵ According to Ean (2019), the loss of EBA status would cost Cambodia about \$654 million and 245,000 jobs.

It is worth mentioning here that although political relations between the United States and Cambodia have been in a downward spiral since 2015, government-to-government cooperation in some practical areas has remained intact. The first one is education. The U.S. government offered numerous educational opportunities for Cambodian students. The most prestigious program is the J. William Fulbright Foreign Student Fellowship, a flagship program of the Department of State that sponsors a small number of students to continue their graduate education in the United States. Since 1993, 189 Khmer students have pursued master's or doctoral studies under the Fulbright program, and many of them have taken on influential positions in their home country such as general, diplomat, scholar, economist, civic leader, scientist, and entrepreneur. In addition to making an impact through their professions, 98% of these scholars self-reported their participation in community service. Some 86% say they have a positive view of the United States. Meanwhile, there have been 123 U.S. Fulbright scholars who have conducted studies in Cambodia. Besides, the United States has also offered shorter exchange opportunities to undergraduates, mid-career professionals, and government officials through programs such as the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (UGRAD), Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), and the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP). The United States is also a top destination for those who can afford private tuition. As of 2018, over 650 Cambodian students were studying at U.S. universities through private funding or various sorts of scholarships, and the number keeps rising every year (Newbill 2019; U.S. Department of Commerce 2019).

Other areas of cooperation include law enforcement, removal of unexploded ordnance (UXO), preservation of ancient temples and artifacts, and environmental protection. For example, in late 2018, Cambodian authorities seized 3.5 tons of African ivory with the help of tips from the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh (Mech 2018b). Moreover, the United States had repatriated to

Cambodia many ancient Khmer antiquities stolen during the civil war and brought charges against those involved in illegal smuggling or sale of such artifacts (Hunt 2019b; Khouth 2019; Len 2016; Mashberg and Blumenthal 2013). Although the Cambodian government temporarily halted the U.S. MIA program in 2017, it reversed the decision one year later despite continued U.S. visa sanction on its foreign ministry officials. The Peace Corps program is another area of stable engagement. Since 2007, the Peace Corps has sent 612 volunteers to serve in 19 of Cambodia's 25 cities and provinces, with its primary emphases being the English language and community education (Peace Corps 2018). Last, Cambodia had firmly abided by global sanctions against North Korea, even though the two countries shared a relationship that dated back to the early 1960s. For example, it has condemned Kim Jong-un's missile testing, closed North Korean-owned businesses, and deported its nationals.

After the CPP won all 125 seats in the 2018 election, Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with the United States began to change course from aggressiveness to accommodation, as the RGC sought to repair damages done by its clampdown on the CNRP since 2015. This accommodation was activated after the CPP secures its control of the country because limited bandwagoning rebalances Cambodia's position between Beijing and Washington and helps in maintaining the support among the winning coalition, which favors China, and the opposition group, which favors the United States.

Less than four months after the 2018 election, Cambodia told the outgoing U.S. Ambassador William A. Heidt that it wanted RFA and VOA to reopen, ironically citing its promotion of freedom of information (Niem 2018). By June 2019, VOA received its broadcasting license. From then on, signs of a mutual *détente* began to emerge. For instance, on October 23, 2019, Hun Sen had his first meeting with the new U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia W. Patrick

Murphy. This date is significant because it fell on the anniversary of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements that aimed to put an end to the Cambodian civil war a little over two decades earlier, an agreement to which the United States was a party. Indeed, it was a day to make peace. Two days later, the premier instructed his cabinet to reinvigorate ties with the United States and went so far as to suggest that there be an elaborate celebration of the 70th anniversary of U.S.-Cambodian diplomatic relations in 2020. He also called for a reunion of Cambodian alumni of U.S. universities and of Peace Corps volunteers, whom he had threatened to expel two years prior (Fresh News 2019a). Then on November 10, 2019, CNRP President Kem Sokha was transferred to house arrest after two years in jail, paving the way for further rapprochement. Ambassador Murphy and Hun Sen had their second encounter that same month, in which the former delivered two friendly letters from President Donald J. Trump. The first reaffirmed the United States' commitment against regime change in Cambodia, and the second was an invitation for Hun Sen to a special U.S.-ASEAN Summit to be held on U.S. soil in the first quarter of 2020 (Bong 2019). The Cambodian leader swiftly accepted the invitation, thanked U.S.'s "generous market access," and applauded Trump's summit initiative, even though the U.S. leader had snubbed ASEAN meetings for two years in a row and sent only his National Security Advisor, Robert O'Brien, to the 2019 summit in Thailand (Fresh News 2019b).

For its parts, the United States appeared to be paying more attention to Cambodia and adopting a less rigid approach after the recent deterioration in ties. For instance, it nominated one of its most experienced career diplomats, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs W. Patrick Murphy, to be the new chief of mission in Phnom Penh in late 2018. In the age of widescale bureaucratic vacancies under the Trump administration, where more critical diplomatic posts in places as Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand remained unfilled at the time,

sending a top hand to a small and strategically less vital state such as Cambodia is a sign of intensifying U.S. attention and effort to counter China's influence in the kingdom.

Then during the 2019 ASEAN summit in Thailand, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tactfully welcomed Cambodia's defense of its national sovereignty and encouraged other countries to follow its example (U.S. Department of State 2019). His remarks came while Cambodia was being scrutinized over a recent report in the *Wall Street Journal* that Cambodia had signed a secret agreement to host a Chinese military outpost at Ream Naval Base. There are two ways to interpret Pompeo's remarks. After several years of diplomatic friction, Washington considered adopting a more flexible position. As it had come to learn over the past decade, a fixated and hardline position on human rights and democracy had only pushed Cambodia closer to China and farther away from the U.S. itself, because Beijing had willingly played the role of a "counter-hegemonic power," filling in the void left open by Washington (Levitsky and Way 2010). Another interpretation is that Pompeo intended to put more pressure on Cambodia because it sent a strong message that the U.S. is watching the situation closely.

By the end of 2019, tension continued to ease further because the RGC had opted for a softer approach and to bandwagon with U.S. interests. However, as noted in Bong (2019), there remain three stumbling blocks to this rapprochement. First, the passage of the three sanctions bills in the U.S. Congress is likely to reverse signs of progress achieved since late 2019. Second, Cambodia must tread carefully to avoid antagonizing China, which may not be pleased with its détente with the United States. Third and most importantly, although CNRP leader Kem Sokha was released from house arrest, a treason charge against him still proceeds in court, and he is barred from political activity. Since Washington has repeatedly pushed for dropping all charges against Sokha, the RGC will likely use restriction of his freedom as leverage to deal with the United States.

This move would repeat what the RGC had done in the past with Sam Rainsy, who had been charged, forced into self-imposed exile, and granted royal pardons at the prime minister's request numerous times. Since releasing Sokha before a verdict could undermine Hun Sen's executive authority and local appeal as a strongman, the court may charge Sokha with treason. Sokha may then be pardoned and have his political rights reinstated if Cambodia's rapprochement with the United States continues unabated. In case he is convicted and handed jail sentence without clemency, bilateral relations between the two countries are likely to strain. As the argument posits, Cambodia bandwagons with the United States by loosening its grip on opposition elements and allowing democratic activities once the CPP wins the election.

To sum up, the trajectory of U.S.-Cambodian political relations from 2009 to 2019 was much more turbulent than Chinese-Cambodian ties. Domestic politics strongly impacted the kingdom's behaviors toward the United States. This volatility reinforces the hypothesis that Phnom Penh distances itself from Washington around election times.

Before the July 2013 general election, tension began to increase due to Cambodia's worsening human rights condition. President Obama's trip to Phnom Penh in November 2012 provided a rare opportunity for him to meet Hun Sen for the first time and to engage in a candid engagement. The meeting, however, added more friction between the two leaders because Obama touched upon the sensitive issue of democracy and political prisoners. Although the 2013 vote was the most competitive process to date, the near-defeat performance of the CPP dominated the agenda of Cambodia's hedging toward the United States because regime survival became a grave danger threatening Hun Sen and his inner circle. As a result, Cambodia orchestrated a prolonged diplomatic offensive campaign against the United States by siding closer with China, cracking down on domestic opposition, and criticizing alleged interventions into its internal affairs by the

U.S. government. These escalations pushed bilateral ties to plummet to the lowest point since 1997. The logic of authoritarian survival dictates that political defeat may lead to severe personal retribution made against the incumbent by the incoming leader. The CPP had to do everything to eliminate the CNRP, even though it had to jeopardize ties with Washington. It was after the CNRP's dissolution in 2017 and the CPP's victory in 2018 that Cambodia began to mend its relations with the U.S. in an attempt to rebalance its hedging.

For its part, the United States seemed to be contemplating a *détente* because of the alarming geopolitical inroads of China in Cambodia. Although there remain several disagreements, Cambodia implemented limited bandwagoning toward the United States by allowing the reopening of VOA and by releasing Kem Sokha from prison. Tension eased further in late 2019 when Cambodia responded positively to the arrival of Ambassador Murphy, by adopting a softer tone and by proposing a fanfare celebration of the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, Hun Sen welcomed President Trump's letter reaffirming U.S. commitment against regime change in Cambodia and accepted the invitation for a special U.S.-ASEAN summit in 2020. Cambodia's apparent rapprochement with the United States in post-July 2018 period indicates that its limited bandwagoning toward Washington fluctuates temporarily around election time, and it reverts to a more stable path after the ruling CPP wins.

Economic Ties

While political relations deteriorated during the 2013 and 2018 elections, economic exchanges between Cambodia and the United States remained strong and expanded almost every year from 2009 to 2019. Deepening economic links were achieved during this period without interruption, as the two countries confined their rhetoric and disagreements to the political arena. We will see further evidence supporting the hypothesis that Cambodia's economic pragmatism

toward the United States is the most consistent and stable element in its hedging because the CPP government could not afford losing access to U.S. market, which is responsible for consuming more than 25% of the kingdom's annual export. In June 2009, the Obama administration removed Cambodia from the finance blacklist to reward its commitment to a free-market economy. The decision allowed U.S. companies planning to invest in Cambodia to seek a guarantee from the U.S. Export-Import Bank (Thayer 2010). Three months later, the two sides amended their bilateral trade agreement to expand cooperation to include food security and climate change. Then Washington channeled \$7.9 million to the USAID's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise and Business Enabling Environment program to support family-run enterprises. In 2016, Cambodian travel goods received duty-free status under GSP, which drove the export volume to expand (Chea 2019).

Table 3.7 Cambodia's Trade with and Foreign Assistance from the U.S., 2009-2019
[Source: Lum (2009, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019), USAID (n.d.), U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.)]

Year	Exports To (\$ million)	Imports From (\$ million)	Trade Balance (\$ million)	Development Assistance (\$ million)
2009	1,942.2	127.1	1,797.2	45
2010	2,300.8	153.8	2,147	80
2011	2,712.4	186.6	2,525.9	75.2
2012	2,619.6	226.4	2,465.1	76
2013	2,771.1	241.2	2,529.9	76
2014	2,847.8	328.1	2,519.7	70.9
2015	3,026.2	391.1	2,635.2	93
2016	2,813.7	360.7	2,453	108
2017	3,062.7	400.1	2,662.6	88.3
2018	3,818.2	445.8	3,372.5	79.3
2019	4,961.7	484.1	4,477.5	21.81

According to Table 3.7, Cambodia's exports to the United States grew from \$1.94 billion in 2009 to \$3.02 billion in 2015 and \$4.96 billion in 2019. Meanwhile, U.S. exports to Cambodia

increased by nearly fourfold from \$127.8 million in 2009 to \$484.1 million in 2019. From 2007 to 2017, two-way trade grew 60% and reached \$4.26 billion in 2018, including \$3.81 billion of Cambodian exports, indicating a 25% uptick compared to 2017 (Bulut 2017; Chea 2019; Sum 2019). In the first six months of 2019 alone, Cambodian exports to the United States soared by 30% with a total value of \$2.24 billion, while sales of travel goods such as luggage, handbags, and backpacks increased by eightfold from \$50 million in 2016 to \$400 million in 2018. Today, the United States consumes about 26% of Cambodia's annual exports, compared to merely 6% used by the Chinese. Together, the United States and the EU constitute over 60% of Cambodia's exports annually (Hutt 2019a).

In addition to trade, the United States remained a sustained source of bilateral aid, even though its generosity was lower than China's. Total U.S. aid to Cambodia increased nearly twofold between 2009 and 2010. It then remained steady at around \$70 or \$80 million every year until the Trump administration cut it by 75% in 2019 due to the deterioration of bilateral relations. Unlike Chinese aid that was targeted mostly at physical infrastructure, U.S. support had concentrated on six areas: Development Assistance (focusing on civil society, early education, human trafficking, political parties, food security); Global Health Program (including reproductive health, STDs prevention, family planning); International Military Education and Training (fostering the study of English, military leadership and human rights training); Foreign Military Financing (including English-language training, vehicle maintenance, logistical management training, and maritime security); and Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, and Demining (Lum 2013). The sixth area is the Economic Support Fund for the UN-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal. Since 2008, the U.S. had contributed \$32.2 million to support the international side of the court along with \$9.8 million to sustain the operation of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam), a non-governmental

public archive working to collect and store historical records related to the Democratic Kampuchea regime (ECCC 2020; Lum 2018). Furthermore, to address its war legacy, the United States provided Cambodia with \$133.6 million to support its mine-removing efforts and victim rehabilitation (Martin et al. 2019).

Finally, there was a considerable presence of U.S. companies in Cambodia, but the total volume of invested capitals and the public visibility of the ventures was minimal compared with those of Chinese firms. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia William E. Todd (2013), several factors are responsible for this hurdle. Among them were the high level of corruption, the weak rule of law, and poor political institutions that created red tape and encouraged U.S. businesses to divert their resources away from Cambodia and toward neighboring countries. High electricity cost, the lack of adequate infrastructure, shortage of skilled workers, and flawed democracy were other confounding factors. Despite its large pool of young and cheap labor and that few restrictions were placed on foreign ownership of investments, according to the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business ranking, Cambodia still stood at 144th place worldwide, faring better than Laos and Myanmar but worse than other ASEAN members (World Bank n.d.). Today, major U.S. brands operating in Cambodia include Chevron, General Electrics, Abbot Laboratories, Coca-Cola, and Starbucks.

The constant increase of Cambodia's trade volume with the United States indicates the stability of its economic pragmatism element that does not vary due to the internal political process, specifically, the general election cycle. Although the 2013 and 2018 elections pushed its political ties with Washington into a downward spiral, economic links remained strong and grew substantially every year. The Trump administration cut 75% of aid to the RGC in 2019, but that amount was very minimal compared to two-way trade between the two countries that rose to more

than \$5.44 billion in that very same year. That is because the U.S. market constitutes over a quarter of Cambodia's annual exports, and it is the largest single buyer of textile and footwear products. Any disruption in bilateral trade may pose detrimental challenges for the CPP's domestic legitimacy and result in social instability.

Military Ties

Defense relations between Cambodia and the United States strengthened during the entire period of the Obama administration from 2009 to 2016. Between March and April 2009, U.S. Marine Corps and Navy personnel conducted joint salvage and medical capabilities exercises with the RCAF personnel (Thayer 2012). Five months later, the United States offered 20 containers of excess military equipment, including Kevlar helmets and camouflage uniforms, with a total value of \$6.5 million. Meanwhile, U.S.-educated RCAF officials led the Defense Strategy Working Group at the Cambodian Ministry of National Defense and worked in consultation with U.S. experts to draft the fourth iteration of a forward-looking defense paper (Stern 2009). The high point came when the RGC opened a defense attaché office at its embassy in Washington, D.C., followed by an official visit of General Tea Banh to the Pentagon in September. Banh was warmly received by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who reaffirmed his commitment to helping Cambodia strengthen its peacekeeping, maritime security, and counterterrorism capabilities. Gates also invited Cambodia to participate in a Defense Policy Dialogue, which would establish a bilateral channel to cooperate on mutual security interests (Thayer 2012).

In 2010, under the State Department-led Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), the two countries co-hosted an international peacekeeping exercise known as the "Angkor Sentinel," which involved 1,000 peacekeepers from 20 countries in command and post drills. The Angkor Sentinel later became an annual exercise between the RCAF and U.S. army. Also, the Cambodian

and U.S. navies began conducting a joint exercise called Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT). There were at least four port visits by U.S. Navy vessels such as the *USS Tortuga* in 2010, *USS Stockdale* in 2011, *USS Blueridge* in 2012, *USS Germantown* in 2016, and hospital ship *USNS Mercy*, which conducted a 10-day program of medical checkups for nearly 30,000 Cambodians in 2010 (U.S. Embassy in Cambodia 2010).

After a prolonged period of deepening military relations under the Obama administration, the RGC's domestic clampdown on the CNRP led defense ties to downgrade once President Trump took office. In January 2017, Cambodia unilaterally canceled the Angkor Sentinel exercise, citing preparations for the upcoming election and local war on drugs (Cheang 2017). There were two reasons for this unprecedented decision. One, in addition to the deterioration of political ties, the CPP government downgraded military relations with the United States to further insulate itself from Western pressure caused by its crackdown on the CNRP. Two, the cancellation was intended to curry favor with China, with which the RCAF had held the first iteration of the "Golden Dragon" exercise in 2016. A few months after the postponement of the Angkor Sentinel, Cambodia distanced itself further by canceling the long-running humanitarian program of the U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion or the Seabees, which had been building \$5 million worth of community projects in Cambodia since 2008, without any reason (Hunt 2019a). Still worse, reports about Chinese military installations at Dara Sakor and the Ream Naval Base added more alarm for U.S. military officials who saw Cambodia swinging drastically toward China in recent years.

Similar to economic pragmatism, Cambodia's indirect balancing toward the United States had yielded growth and stability since relations had been restored in 2004. Nonetheless, since the CPP's poor performance in the 2013 election had shaken the confidence of its winning coalition, which feared possible defeat by the CNRP, and that the 2018 general election was critical for Hun

Sen's political survival, it was worth causing temporary damage to defense ties with the United States in order to secure the status quo.

Nevertheless, there were signs that Cambodia might reverse course on its military hedging with the U.S. Although it had canceled the Angkor Sentinel exercise indefinitely, engagements in other military-related areas such as humanitarian demining, POW/MIA matters, international peacekeeping, and medical research remained largely unscathed (U.S. Department of Defense 2019). Second, high-level exchanges between military leaders had slowed but had not been terminated. For example, on January 15-16, 2019, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Asia Joseph H. Felter toured Cambodia, where he met with senior RCAF officials and discussed the revitalization of military ties (Sun et al. 2019). Then in April, deputy Commander-in-Chief of the RCAF, Lieutenant General Hun Manet, attended the Pacific Special Operation Conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, where he discussed regional counterterrorism and met with Commander of the U.S. Special Operation Command Pacific, Brigadier General Jonathan B. Braga, to boost defense ties between the United States and Cambodia (Niem 2019).

Third, in September 2019, Cambodia participated in the first ASEAN-U.S. Maritime Exercise (AUMX), which involved 1,260 military personnel from all ten ASEAN countries (Heydarian 2019). Starting from Sattahip Naval Base in Thailand, the group sailed through the contested South China Sea before ending in Singapore. Although the exercise sends a message to Beijing, it should also be viewed as a hedging strategy pursued multilaterally by ASEAN members aimed at diversifying their military engagement with major powers, because the joint exercise with the United States was not exclusive. In fact, ASEAN had also held a joint naval exercise with China since 2018. As a participant in AUMX, Cambodia used this opportunity to signal its interests to mend relations with the United States and to join other ASEAN members to enmesh Washington

deeper in regional security affairs. Last, during Ambassador Murphy's recent meeting with Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Banh, the two sides discussed the resumption of the Angkor Sentinel, the docking of U.S. Navy's vessels, and other military-to-military activities, even though the ongoing treason trial against Kem Sokha remained an impediment (Mech 2019).

In summary, U.S.-Cambodian defense relations from 2009 to 2019 can be separated into two distinct periods. In the first period, which covers the entire Obama administration from 2009 to 2016, Cambodia consistently implemented its indirect balancing toward the United States through high-level exchanges between military officials, dockings of U.S. Navy vessels, joint land and maritime exercises, and cooperation in other practical areas described above. In the second period, which stretches from early 2017 to late 2019, Cambodia downgraded its defense ties with the United States. It began to invigorate ties with the U.S. again after the CPP won in 2018.

This fluctuation challenges the hypothesis, which argues that Cambodia will distance from the United States politically and leave economic and military cooperation intact. However, it reinforces the argument that domestic politics does influence Cambodia's hedging between the United States and China. Moreover, this volatility sheds light on an unexpected and interesting dynamic in the pattern of hedging of a small authoritarian state. It indicates that, when faced with a critical internal threat to its survival, the CPP government is willing to shift politically as well as militarily between two major powers in order to remain in office, even though such decision bears high risk and that it has broad implications on the defense posture of Cambodia itself and the strategic landscape in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

Key Findings

What happened from 2009 to 2019 with Cambodia's economic, military, and political relations with the United States and China further support the hypothesis about the causal relationship between the kingdom's domestic politics and hedging. First, Cambodia's economic pragmatism continued to mature and grow over time, regardless of two high-stakes elections in 2013 and 2018. Its two-way trade with China and with the United States both increased significantly in total volume, although it is essential to remember that Cambodia exported much less to the PRC than it imported, while the surplus of its trade with the United States grew the entire time. Furthermore, the two powers were among the principal donors of foreign aid, although their assistance fulfilled different demands of the Cambodian government. Chinese aid was mostly targeted at the development of physical infrastructures, whereas U.S. aid concentrated on sectors such as civil society, democracy, public governance, public health, education, demining, and cultural preservation. Even though elections in 2013 and 2018 were watershed moments for the CPP, economic relations with these two powers remained strong, stable, and expanded. That is because economic growth is essential for the CPP's domestic legitimacy.

Second, Cambodia continued to implement indirect balancing toward the United States and China in order to modernize the RCAF, maintain internal stability, and respond to external threats posed by neighboring Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos as well as strategic fluidity in the Asia-Pacific region. On the one hand, military relations with the U.S. matured from 2009 to 2016, thanks to the rapprochement pursued earlier during George W. Bush's presidency. The two most notable achievements were the official visit by the Cambodian Defense Minister to the Pentagon and the six annual iterations of the Angkor Sentinel exercise from 2010 to 2016. These developments show that Cambodia looked to the U.S. as a potential partner in the defense arena, although U.S. military

leaders still had to tread cautiously due to lingering concerns about the RGC's human rights record. Following the political suppression against the CNRP, the free press, NGOs, and government critics, Cambodia's defense ties with the U.S. began to deteriorate in 2017, because Cambodia saw the need to distance itself from the U.S. militarily to appease China, to reduce Western penetration in its domestic affairs, and to secure electoral victory for the CPP. Cambodia had canceled the Angkor Sentinel exercise and the Seabees' program indefinitely, although high-level exchanges and engagement in some practical areas remained active. By the end of 2019, some signs indicate that this downgrading ties with the United States may be a temporary decision. After all, China is the principal supplier of arms and technical support to the RCAF, but China's experience still lags behind the United States in the areas of counterterrorism and maritime security, which Cambodia still needs to strengthen.

On the other hand, Cambodia deepened its relations with the Chinese military because, first, China provided much more material support to the RCAF than the U.S., and, second, China was willing to look the other way regarding Cambodia's domestic politics, and it firmly backed the CPP, which had become more autocratic after it almost lost to the CNRP in 2013. Non-alliance ties with both the U.S. and China enable Cambodia to balance each power's influence on its defense policy, to absorb resources for its armed forces, to send a signal to the potential aggressors, and to project a nuanced image of its alignment posture.

Third, the area of political relations is where we see the most significant difference because Cambodia uses limited bandwagoning as the primary way to hedge between the U.S. and China during each general election. The actions of the RGC in the 2013 election pushed Cambodia's ties with Washington into freefall because the RGC began curbing activities of domestic opposition. Unlike what happened in 2003 and 2008, when Cambodia shifted away from the U.S. temporarily

and tried to repair damages afterward, events in 2013 posed the gravest threat to the CPP's survival since at least 1993 when it lost to the royalist FUNCINPEC but managed to achieve a coalition government. As a result, diplomatic offensive after July 2013 needed to be more prolonged, more systematic, and more intense because the price of losing would be too high for the winning coalition after being in power for over three decades. As Milan Svolik (2012) argues, the possibility of personal retribution under authoritarian governments is constant. It always looms large over decisions made by the ruling elites because there is no independent political institution to either protect or advocate for a fair and peaceful transition of power. The culture of personal vendetta is alive and well in Cambodian politics since leaders depend on personalist control and charisma to project their power rather than democratic institutions and the rule of law. As one Khmer proverb vividly puts it, “when water rises, fish eats ants; when water recedes, ants eat fish” (*pel teuk laoeng trey si sramaoch pel teuk haoc sramaoch si trey*) (Un 2019).

To safeguard the status quo, the CPP had to do whatever it took to eliminate the CNRP before the 2018 election, including a highly intense and prolonged diplomatic campaign against U.S. influence in Cambodia. Once it won, the ruling party reverted to bandwagon with the U.S., as Washington also appeared to be contemplating a *détente*. For the time being, as long as Cambodia continued to accommodate China on the “One China” policy, the South China Sea, and its positions in regional and global forums, the PRC would reciprocate by backing Hun Sen with little to no regard for the worsening of democracy and human rights. As a result, Sino-Cambodian political ties are mutually beneficial and practically immune to what happens domestically unless an unexpected change of events pushes the CPP out of power, which is a highly unlikely possibility for the near future. Even so, China would likely put its eggs in the new leader's basket when its interests were at stake.

3.3 What About Diversification?

So far, this thesis has examined Cambodia's implementation of limited bandwagoning, indirect balancing, and economic pragmatism. The other three sub-elements, such as dominance denial, binding engagement, and economic diversification, have received only brief attention. This segment traces these policies by looking at Cambodia's relations with third-party actors in the regions that are not the United States and China – namely Japan, the EU, and ASEAN. The reason is that Cambodia maintains a middle path by forging a nuanced position with not only two but with multiple external powers to create a balance of influence in its foreign policy so that no one country can have too much unilateral influence on its behavior and autonomy.

3.3.1 Dominance Denial

Dominance denial is a risk-contingency measure aimed at preventing political overdependence on external powers. Because it has had a long and often close strategic relationship with Cambodia, Japan helps to showcase this sub-element of the kingdom's hedging. The two countries first came into contact in 1569 when their merchant ships began docking at each other's ports to conduct trade (Leang 2017). For the recent past, however, the time of World War II is especially pertinent. From 1941 to 1945, when Japan occupied Cambodia, which was then part of French Indochina, the occupying troops did not inflict any significant brutalities on the Khmer people the way they did on the Chinese. After the war ended, Cambodia decided not to seek any reparations, leading the Japanese parliament to pass a resolution expressing appreciation for Cambodia's graciousness. In 1953, Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk became the first Asian monarch to visit Japan in the post-war era, where he met with Emperor Hirohito and signed a bilateral treaty to promote peace and to strengthen bonds of friendship (Chheang 2018).

Following the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, Japan bankrolled a significant proportion of the UNTAC mission and deployed 608 ground troops, 75 civilian police, and 41 polling station officers to help keep the peace in Cambodia from 1991 to 1993 (Takeda 1998). It was during this time that the Japanese Self-Defense Force (SDF) was deployed outside of its home country for the first time since the end of World War II, as the Japanese public began embracing the changing face of their military power (Smith 2019). Due to Japan's generosity, the position of the Special Representative of UN Secretary-General overseeing administrative component of UNTAC was given to Japanese diplomat Yasushi Akashi. Since the end of the UNTAC mission in 1993, Japan has continued to play a pivotal role in reconstructing Cambodia and in supporting progress in soft and hard infrastructure, social services, agriculture, rural development, human resources, and public governance. Following the power struggle between the CPP and FUNCINPEC in July 1997, Japan broke ranks with the West by choosing not to condemn Hun Sen; and it spearheaded a peace deal between the two parties. These kind gestures had gradually cemented trust in Japan among Cambodian leaders and among the majority of the population who looked for additional sources of assistance and partnership other than China and the United States.

During Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Phnom Penh in June 2007, the two countries signed the Agreement for the Liberalization, Promotion, and Protection of Investment to bolster bilateral economic exchanges. Then in 2013, Cambodia upgraded its ties with Japan to the level of strategic partnership, which covers a wide range of cooperation, including security, defense, and policy coordination, days after China announced its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. Furthermore, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Nam Hong agreed with his Japanese counterpart to hold a regular consultation between the two countries' ministries of defense and foreign affairs. According to Leang (2017), there are three reasons why the RGC

raised Tokyo's diplomatic profile in its foreign policy formula. First, Japan has shown itself to be a reliable and sincere partner, which had contributed an enormous amount of support since the early 1990s. Unlike Washington, which tended to criticize Phnom Penh's human rights and democracy record openly, Tokyo would tread carefully regarding domestic politics. Also, the two nations share a similar vision of a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Asia.

Second, Hun Sen still remembered China's principal roles in the Khmer Rouge regime that butchered nearly two million Cambodians. Before his rapprochement with Beijing in 1997, Hun Sen spent most of his time under the PRK regime backed by Vietnam criticizing and fighting China. He wrote in 1988 that "China was the root of everything that was evil in Cambodia" (Jeldres 2012). Although an unexpected chain of events brought him closer to the PRC, there remained a lingering sense of mistrust that China might swap old friends for new ones whenever its interests were at stake. For instance, following the CPP's poor performance in 2013 and during the subsequent massive demonstration led by the CNRP and its supporters, China hedged its bets against the uncertain future change of political leadership in Cambodia by maintaining its silence about the protest; one China's state media outlets published a very rare openly critical story calling for the CPP's reform (Ciorciari 2015).

Third and most importantly, ties with Japan have helped Cambodia safeguard its autonomy and avoid political and economic domination by the Chinese. Aside from its political influence, Japan has been one of the kingdom's principal economic benefactors. For instance, it accounts for 20% of the total inflow of ODA since 1992 (Chheang 2018). From 2011 to 2015 alone, Japanese ODA disbursement to Cambodia totaled \$2.52 billion, including \$213.9 million in loans, \$1.4 billion in grants, and \$827 million in technical cooperation (Leang 2017). In the midst of the domestic clampdown on the CNRP in 2017, Japan shrugged off criticisms by global rights groups

and inked a \$90 million aid agreement with the RGC and offered an additional \$7.5 million along with 10,000 ballot boxes after the United States and the EU suspended their support for the 2018 general election in Cambodia (Chandran 2018). Japan has been the largest international donor to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which is responsible for \$87 million or 28% of the total costs incurred by the court since 2006 (ECCC 2020).

Table 3.8 Cambodia's Trade with Japan, 2009-2019 [Source: International Monetary Fund's Direction of Trade Statistics (data.imf.org)]

Year	Exports to Japan (\$ million)	Imports from Japan (\$ million)	Trade Balance (\$ million)
2008	32.12	114.74	-84.62
2009	79.52	118.91	-39.39
2010	89.51	156.35	-66.84
2011	153.32	248.33	-95.01
2012	199.15	222.97	-23.82
2013	334.22	175.47	158.74
2014	344.88	263.96	80.92
2015	571.55	422.95	148.6
2016	827.19	528.27	298.92
2017	821.38	584.42	236.96
2018	997.50	637.35	360.15
2019	N/A	N/A	N/A

Trade is another area where Cambodia depends on Japan to prevent China's domination. Table 3.8 indicates that although the kingdom imported more from Japan than it exported from 2008 to 2012, this trend reversed its course from 2013 onward with Cambodia enjoying a trade surplus of \$360 million in 2018. Compared with China, although the volume of Japan's FDI is minor, the number is still significant for a small economy like Cambodia's. By 2019, there were 137 Japanese-run FDI projects, which were worth \$2.5 billion, as well as 1,799 small and medium enterprises (Khmer Times 2020). Furthermore, having close relations with Japan enhances the CPP's popularity. According to one recent opinion poll, 48% and 84% of Cambodians view Japan

as an essential partner and as a reliable friend, respectively (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019b). Tokyo is also the most trusted foreign country among Cambodians, whose popularity outperforms both Beijing and Washington by a significant margin.

To reinforce its commitment to Japan and to avoid overdependence on China, Cambodia has taken several measures to support Tokyo's regional positions. In 2014, it endorsed ASEAN's joint communiqué with Japan underlining freedom of overflight following China's ADIZ declaration over the East China Sea (Leang 2017). More recently, it was the first Southeast Asian state to endorse the Japanese version of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," even though FOIP was viewed critically by China as an overt attempt to offset its power (Takahashi 2019). Cambodia is also part of the Japan-Mekong Cooperation grouping, a regional competitor of the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. From 1999 to 2019, there were 25 visits by Cambodian leaders to Japan, including King Norodom Sihamoni, Prime Minister Hun Sen, and other top government officials. The premier himself visited Japan every year between 2012 and 2019, except in 2016, and built warm personal relations with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019a). In late 2017, Abe went so far as to throw a surprise birthday celebration with a candlelit cake for Hun Sen during his visit to Tokyo.

Overall, Cambodia implements dominance denial in hedging, in part, by forging political, economic, and strategic relations with Japan in order to deny China's unilateral domination of Cambodia's foreign policy. Nevertheless, Japan is only one of many foreign countries with whom Cambodia maintains diplomatic relations as part of its dominance denial. Other notable players include ASEAN members, Australia, India, Russia, South Korea, the EU, and, obviously, the United States – all of them are partners in varying areas of engagement and intensity. The place of the United States in Cambodia's hedging strategy and Japan's significant economic influence on

the RGC along with its keen interest in balancing Chinese power make it logical that Phnom Penh relies on Tokyo as a strategic partner to cultivate a balanced foreign policy with Beijing, thus avoiding becoming subservience to external power.

3.3.2 Economic Diversification

Economic diversification is another part of the risk-contingency pillar in Cambodia's hedging, where a state forges economic links with as many external powers as possible to increase the number of trade partners, to attract more FDI, and to diversify its economic portfolio. In addition to the United States, China, and Japan, the kingdom also has significant economic links with other key players, one of the most important being the European Union. As a collective entity, the EU is Cambodia's largest export destination, absorbing even more products than the United States, which is the largest state buyer. As one of 48 underdeveloped countries, Cambodia has been granted the EU's EBA preferential trade status since 2001. Under the EBA scheme, Cambodia can export all products except weapons, which are mostly textile and footwear goods, to the EU without tariffs and quotas.

According to Table 3.9 below, Cambodia's exports to the EU rose significantly from \$811.51 million in 2008 to \$2.79 billion in 2013 and over \$5.5 billion by the end of 2017, which was 49% of the total outflow of Cambodian goods that year. The EU and the United States together accounted for 60.9% of Cambodia's overall exports in 2018 (European Commission 2019). Furthermore, just as its trade with the United States, Cambodia exported much more to the EU than it imported back, leading to a constant trade surplus that grew year after year. Especially given the trade numbers with China for the same period, it is clear why a small state such as Cambodia incorporates economic diversification into its hedging strategy.

Table 3.9 Cambodia's Trade with the European Union, 2008-2018 [Source: European Commission (2019)]

Year	European Union		Cambodia	
	Exports to (\$ million)	Imports from	Total Export	Total Import (\$
2008	811.51	170.73	3,306.41	3,354.40
2009	862.51	141.96	3,987.11	3,120.06
2010	1,121.93	170.73	4,700.17	4,115.44
2011	1,665.15	216.18	5,376.41	4,921.12
2012	2,268.25	273.83	6,811.45	6,135.22
2013	2,793.74	266.07	7,771.13	7,747.69
2014	3,370.22	331.48	5,780.36	8,619.21
2015	4,598.58	514.30	8,627.02	11,279.52
2016	5,124.06	710.63	10,181.47	13,004.70
2017	5,555.23	943.44	10,717.10	15,942.86
2018	5,942.23	858.08	11,743.73	18,334.24

The idea of diversifying the trade partnership that it has with the EU is not only about supplementing trade with China, the United States and Japan. It also involves the maintenance and creation of jobs for over a million textile workers, many of whom could be a potential source of anti-government dissent if left unemployed. Moreover, most of these workers are adults who are better mobilized than employees in other service or manufacturing sectors of the Cambodian economy, and they tend to support opposition parties such as the SRP and the CNRP, which deployed populist and nationalist rhetoric to stir anger and to pit ordinary workers against the CPP elites. The massive protest led by the CNRP after the 2013 election, in which parts of the country ground to a halt and which escalated into a violent demonstration in Phnom Penh, is an example of that risk created by discontent among factory workers.

Trade is the lifeblood of Cambodia's internal stability, social development, peace, and the legitimacy of the CPP government. That is why the country diversifies its trade portfolio as much as possible so that it does not put all of its eggs in one basket. Growing trade figures with the United States, China, Japan, and the EU discussed above are evidence supporting the hypothesis

that Cambodia continuously implemented economic diversification in its foreign policy, which does not fluctuate during the general elections between 1999 and 2019.

3.3.3 Binding Engagement

Binding engagement is a profit-maximization policy aimed at establishing diplomatic contact with external powers, shaping their foreign policy behaviors, and integrating them into the region so that they play responsible and constructive roles that enhance peace and stability (Kuik 2015). Much like dominance denial, binding engagement is intended to safeguard the hedger's independence and ability to steer clear of overt alignment or unwanted alliance, and it can be implemented either bilaterally state by state or multilaterally by a group of like-minded states. For example, Cambodia bilaterally binds the United States and China by engaging them through government-to-government channels, policy exchanges, and dialogues. To understand how Cambodia uses multilateral binding engagement, this section looks at Cambodia's position in ASEAN, where it works in concerted efforts with other small states to enmesh the U.S. and China within the region in order to promote stable and peaceful relations between these two major powers as well as harmonious ties between ASEAN and each respective powers.

After being a guest from 1993 to 1995, and then an observer from 1995 to 1996, Cambodia became the 10th and latest member of ASEAN on April 30, 1999. Since then, ASEAN has been a cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy. As a member, it enjoys international legitimacy as a state possessing equal diplomatic footing and privilege in Southeast Asia's economy, politics, and security affairs. Three years into its membership, Cambodia was put to a stress test when it hosted the ASEAN summit for the first time in 2002. During that meeting, Cambodia made a significant contribution to promoting peaceful relations between ASEAN and China by pushing for the adoption of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). This measure

was intended to promote a peaceful settlement of disputes among interested parties, to build trust and confidence, to reaffirm commitment to UNCLOS, and to call for self-restraint and avoidance of escalation near disputed territories (ASEAN 2002). DOC is also a step forward for the eventual enactment of a Code of Conduct (COC) between ASEAN claimant and China.

When chairing the ASEAN summit for the second time in 2012, Cambodia faced some problems but also achieved some progress. For example, it came under severe criticism when ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in 45 years, leading analysts and scholars alike to label the country as China's proxy that drew a wedge within ASEAN. This debacle, however, can be interpreted into two distinct ways. First, it is a sign of the PRC's growing influence on Cambodia after more than a decade of economic and diplomatic inducement. Second, it shows that since the early 2000s, Cambodia has adopted a very consistent foreign policy concerning the South China Sea. It is not a claimant state, and the RGC has said that the issue should be negotiated bilaterally between each ASEAN claimant and China. According to Cambodia, using the regional body as an adjudicating platform does not represent the interests of all member states, especially those who do not have a territorial stake in that area. Also, collective negotiation by ASEAN might result in the internationalization of the dispute, paving the way for the involvement of the United States and Japan, both of which are regional competitors of China, that will further complicate the situation. Last, it is highly likely to stoke tension and hostility from Beijing, which is the largest trading partner of many ASEAN members, which will be detrimental to regional peace and prosperity.

Although the disagreement dominated headlines around the world, other noticeable achievements under Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship should be commended. For example, it oversaw the adoption of the long-awaited Bali Concord III Plan of Action (2013-2017), which lays

out a common platform for ASEAN's external relations (Heng 2013). ASEAN also officially launched the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement between 10 ASEAN nations and Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Moreover, Cambodia managed to get the EU, the United Kingdom, and Brazil to commit to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a core document embodying respect for sovereignty, peaceful settlement of disputes, non-intervention with one another's internal affairs, and non-use of force (ASEAN 1976). External powers must accede to TAC before they are eligible to participate in ASEAN-led multilateral platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, which are premier intergovernmental forums for dialogues on political and security issues among states in the Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN has taken the driver's seat in socializing key players such as the U.S., China, the EU, India, Russia, Japan, and Australia; familiarizing them with regional norms such as the "ASEAN Way," preventive diplomacy, confidence-building, consensus decision-making process, and integrating them into consultation on defense and security policy. Regarding the dispute in the South China Sea, Cambodia, with the help of Indonesia, pushed for the adoption of the ASEAN's Six-Point Principles, which were endorsed by the United States. They reaffirm commitment to full implementation of the 2002 DOC, a guideline for the DOC, the early conclusion of a binding COC, the exercise of self-restraint, peaceful conflict resolution, and respect for UNCLOS and other international laws (Emmerson 2012).

ASEAN's relations with the United States also affected Cambodia, which had been an active member of ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). The ADMM-Plus counts Washington as one of eight dialogue partners, and much like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, it is a multilateral platform for cooperation on defense and security

matters. Its priorities include counterterrorism, peacekeeping, military medicine, maritime security, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance and disaster management (ADMM 2017). In November 2012, Cambodia hosted U.S. President Barack Obama for the 7th East Asia Summit, as tension was running high between ASEAN and China as well as Japan and China. Then in February 2016, Hun Sen joined nine other ASEAN leaders for a special summit with Obama in Rancho Mirage, California. Aside from the fact that it was the first U.S.-ASEAN summit held on U.S. soil, it was a symbolic achievement, for it indicated an elevating U.S. commitment to broaden and institutionalize its engagement with Southeast Asia, especially after the two sides upgraded their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership in 2015.

Furthermore, it shed light on evolving attitudes among U.S. policymakers from viewing ASEAN as a “talk shop” to seeing it as a principal gateway through which to strengthen the United States’ influence and image in the region. The special summit ended with the Sunnylands Declaration, which reaffirms ASEAN’s leadership role in maintaining a rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific, freedom of navigation, and cooperation in traditional and non-traditional security matters (The White House 2016). Normally, Hun Sen had publicly supported any initiative aimed at promoting ASEAN’s relations with the U.S, China, and other powers. That is one reason why he had the same positive attitude toward President Trump’s invitation for a similar special summit in early 2020, even though the plan was later postponed indefinitely by the U.S. due to the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Finally, in response to the United States’ and Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy, Cambodia and other ASEAN members pushed for their own version of FOIP. Released on June 23, 2019, “the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP) or simply “the Outlook,” offers a more inclusive vision of connections between the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean

regions, compared with the U.S. document that tends to target China militarily and strategically. As Acharya (2019) argues, AOIP is a collective effort of Southeast Asian states to shape their region based on ASEAN's centrality and norms such as TAC, regional inclusiveness, consensus-building, and normative relations rather than the military-centered approach of Washington. AOIP is an additional step taken by ASEAN to send a signal to the major powers that it has a say in how diplomatic, economic, security, strategic architectures in the Asia-Pacific region evolve and that no external actors can dominate its backyard.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

This thesis argues that from 1999 to 2019, Cambodia's hedging foreign policy between the United States and China incorporated the stable implementation of economic pragmatism, economic diversification, binding engagement, dominance denial, and indirect balancing. However, it showed fluctuation in limited bandwagoning with the United States during each Cambodian general election. Comprehensive evidence presented in Chapter 3 firmly supports this argument. Cambodia distanced itself politically from Washington and strengthened ties with Beijing in a period when the ruling CPP moved to curtail the activities of opposition parties in order to secure an electoral result in its favor. Once the party won, Cambodia worked to repair damages with the United States in order to rebalance its foreign policy. Meanwhile, the other five sub-elements of hedging remained constant with little to no fluctuation. Table 4.1 on page 138 summarizes the trajectories of each sub-element of Cambodia's hedging before and after the general election in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018.

First, Cambodia steadily implemented dominance denial by forging strategic ties with Japan. Keep in mind that Japan is only one of a number of countries with whom Cambodia has built relations to broaden its diplomatic links. There are three reasons why Tokyo received such a high profile in Phnom Penh's hedging strategy. First, it sits in the middle of Beijing and Washington. Like the two powers, Japan has traditionally been a traditional player in Cambodia since the early 1990s. Second, Japan is one of the biggest donors of aid to Cambodia, providing for both soft and hard infrastructure, and it has proven to be a very reliable and sincere partner since the end of the Cambodian civil war. Third, Japan is widely considered as a Western power, which does not speak critically and openly about human rights and democracy issues that antagonize the ruling CPP, namely, Prime Minister Hun Sen. As a result, the RGC retains close

relations with Japan to neutralize Chinese domination and to signal its non-alignment posture. The dominance denial column in Table 4.1 shows a constant upward trajectory of Cambodia's dominance denial with the upward arrow (↑) during all four elections.

Table 4.1 Trajectories of Cambodia's Hedging Sub-Elements, 1999-2019 (*Source: Author*)

General Election	Limited		Economic		Indirect		Dominance	Economic	Binding
	Bandwagoning		Pragmatism		Balancing		Denial	Diversification	Engagement
	U.S.	China	U.S.	China	U.S.	China	Japan	EU	ASEAN
Pre-2003	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Post-2003	→	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Pre-2008	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Post-2008	→	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Pre-2013	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Post-2013	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Pre-2018	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑
Post-2018	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑

Second, to diversify its economic links, Cambodia trades with the EU to supplement commercial exchanges with the United States and China. As the largest single collective buyer of Cambodian products, the EU alone consumes more than 40% of exports every year and has granted Cambodia with the most preferential status with free quotas and tariffs. As a result, the economic diversification column in Table 4.1 indicates a constant upward trajectory (↑) for the entire period covered in this study.

Third, Cambodia acts concertedly with fellow ASEAN member states to enmesh the United States and China in ASEAN-led norms, dialogues, and institutions in order to create a regional balance of power and influence among all interested powers. Under its chairmanship in 2002 and 2012, ASEAN took noticeable steps in adopting documents such as the DOC, the Six-Points Principle, and the Bali Concord III Plan of Action (2013-2017). Although Cambodia's resistance against proposed ASEAN collective negotiations with Beijing on the South China Sea dispute has earned it regional criticisms, the issue remains unsolved even after the chairmanship had been passed among many countries since 2012. Furthermore, vocal claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines, which criticized Cambodia for its alleged spoiling, had ironically grown more accommodating toward China in recent years due to Beijing's immense economic power, which surpasses that of the United States in trade and investment. As a small state, Cambodia wants to see a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia that is free of hegemonic domination. That is why it has supported ASEAN's relations with regional players such as China, the United States, Japan and others who aim to engage with ASEAN. The involvement of more external players means that there is a better chance for Southeast Asia to reject the great power politics that could engulf the region in war, disrupt free trade, and trigger hostility among states. For these reasons, Cambodia constantly implemented binding engagement, which is indicated by an upward arrow (↑).

Fourth, Cambodia's economic pragmatism toward the United States and China stayed stable and expanded steadily over time, as indicated by an upward arrow (↑) before and after each of the four elections. Although Cambodia exported much less to China than it imported back, the PRC was the most significant foreign investor and donor of aid, which bankrolled the RGC's infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads, and irrigation systems across rural parts of

Cambodia. These projects boosted Hun Sen's legitimacy among Khmer electorates as a leader who delivers real results for the people and makes their livelihood better by the day.

Meanwhile, the Cambodian economy continued to rely heavily on exports of garment and footwear products to the United States, which constitutes about 26% of total goods sold. Taken together, the EU and the United States consume approximately 60% of Cambodia's annual exports, a share valued at about \$9.76 billion or 40% of total GDP in 2018. Furthermore, Washington is a long-time provider of foreign aid in areas of human rights and democracy, civil society, public health, education, and other areas, which supplement Chinese aid. Economic links with both the United States and China through trade, foreign aid, investment, and others enabled the CPP to create jobs, improve social development, maintain internal stability, bring in more foreign capital and new skills, and, most importantly, keep the economy growing. For these reasons, Cambodia's implementation of economic pragmatism toward both the United States and the PRC experienced only growth between 1999 and 2019, just like the hypothesis claims.

Fifth, indirect balancing also had a low degree of change over time. Cambodia considers China as the principal supplier of military aid and a key partner in the RCAF's modernization program through bilateral land and naval exercises. As in the political realm, the PRC provided weaponry, and it trained RCAF personnel without regard to Cambodia's domestic political conditions, whether in the general election, human rights, or democracy. This friendly gesture was highly appreciated by Cambodia, which seeks to strengthen its defense capability without the forms and commitments of an alliance, forging an autonomous path and preparing itself for the fluid strategic and security structures in the region.

On a similar note, Cambodia appreciates that its defense relations with the United States have been to the benefit of its armed forces. Since the early 2000s, as leader of the War on Terror,

Washington had provided both material and training assistance to strengthen RCAF's capacities in counterterrorism, maritime security, and border control, all of which are critical to Cambodia's national security in the twenty-first century. International peacekeeping operations are another vital area, which the United States made a noticeable footprint. The Angkor Sentinel exercise serves as a primary platform for the kingdom to strengthen its army, to raise its international profile by contributing to the UN-led peacekeeping, and to foster mutual understanding between RCAF and U.S. forces. From 1999 to 2016, there was an unabated upward trajectory (↑) in defense relations between Washington and Phnom Penh. Between 2017 and 2018, ties, however, deteriorated due to the RGC's suppression of the CNRP. This situation is characterized by the downward arrow (↓) in pre-2018 of indirect balancing toward the United States shown in Table 4.1. Then in early 2019, the kingdom began to repair the damage done by joining the AUMX and by signaling its interest in restarting the Angkor Sentinel exercise, docking of the U.S. Navy, and other military-to-military activities in order to balance against its dependence on the Chinese PLA. It indicates a rapprochement (↑) in Cambodia's defense policy toward the United States.

Finally, Cambodia's limited bandwagoning with China was utterly immune to what happened at home. Beijing was willing to work with Hun Sen and backed the CPP so long as Cambodia bandwagoned with its core interests, such as the "One China" policy and its ascendancy in the South China Sea, supporting China's domestic and international agendas. The two countries' political relations are mutually beneficial, and they operate at the highest government-to-government and party-to-party levels. Even though there were four general elections between 1999 and 2019, Sino-Cambodian political relations were strong and deepened every year. This condition is captured by the upward arrow (↑) in Table 4.1.

As the hypothesis posits, the U.S.-Cambodian political relations are a completely different story from Sino-Cambodian ties. Before the 2003 and 2008 elections, bilateral ties improved steadily (↑) because Cambodia accommodated with the War on Terror. After each of these two elections, tension rose, and relations became unsteady after the RGC suppressed SRP lawmakers, namely, opposition leader Sam Rainsy. Even though there was a growing contention between Phnom Penh and Washington, relations did not experience any major disruption since the White House maintained a more flexible position toward Cambodia than the U.S. Congress did. The rightward arrow (→) in the pre-2003 and pre-2008 rows of limited bandwagoning with the United States indicates that the two countries had public disagreements on issues of human rights and democracy, which strained their ties, but the rhetoric did not do severe damage to official relations.

Cambodia's political ties with the United States began to deteriorate rapidly (↓) in 2013, which was an election year. After the incumbent CPP almost lost to the CNRP in July of that year, relations plummeted further into a downward spiral (↓) and remained in such condition until the end of 2018. Then in 2019, the two countries began to contemplate diplomatic rapprochement (↑). This repeatedly volatile nature of U.S.-Cambodian political relations from 1999 to 2019, which shifts from warmth to deterioration and back to warmth again every election cycle, supports the argument that Cambodia's limited bandwagoning tends to see a much higher degree of fluctuation than the other five elements of its hedging foreign policy between the United States and the PRC.

In conclusion, domestic politics dictated that Cambodia's hedging foreign policy between the United States and China from 1999 to 2019 operates at a different degree of limited bandwagoning, which would be, nonetheless, a trajectory much like that of the five other sub-elements. That is because the ruling CPP under Prime Minister Hun Sen must maintain economic growth, create jobs, safeguard national security, and retain foreign policy independence in order

to maintain the support of the winning coalition, which is pro-China, and the opposition group, which is pro-U.S. As a small country with flawed democracy, Cambodia adopts hedging out of internal and external necessity because other foreign policy models are not viable and could pose a grave risk to the incumbent's legitimacy and the nation. As long as geopolitical uncertainty in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific remains as uncertain as it is today, the Kingdom of Cambodia will continue to hedge between the United States and China into the future.

4.1 Policy Implications

This thesis has three policy implications for scholars and practitioners of international relations who seek to analyze Cambodia's foreign policy between contesting major powers, namely, the United States and China, and for those who study geopolitical and security affairs of the Asia-Pacific region.

First, endowed with a tragic history, limited resources, weak institutions, and vulnerable geography that is wedged between hostile neighbors and in a region shared by more than one potential hegemony, Cambodia today is a hedger by default. After its predecessor, the Khmer Empire, collapsed in the 15th century, Cambodia played the balancing game between Thailand and Vietnam by pitting each against the other in order to safeguard its existence. Soon after it became independent in 1953, Cambodia, under Norodom Sihanouk, opted for neutrality in response to real and perceived threats from North Vietnam, on the one hand, and Thailand and South Vietnam, on the other. It sought assistance and guarantee from both the socialist and the capitalist camps so that it could remain a neutral state in a geopolitically hyperpolarized world divided between two ideological lines. Cambodia under Hun Sen hedges between the United States and China because it faces with similar internal and external challenges that occurred in the past, such as weak central government, poor armed forces, threats from neighboring countries, the need for external

legitimacy, and growing geopolitical polarization around its peripheries. Even though Phnom Penh tends to be closer to Beijing than Washington in normal circumstances, both these countries continue to be the two most preeminent external players, which have diplomatic, economic, military, and strategic impacts on the RGC's foreign policy.

There are two key takeaways for U.S. policymakers in this regard. The first is to expect to see Cambodia adopt a hardline approach toward Washington around the general election and to view this policy as a temporary choice rather than a permanent one. As demonstrated throughout this study, Cambodia distanced itself from the United States politically and leaned closer to China during the elections in 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018 in order to secure a favorable electoral result for the ruling CPP since defeat would mean severe consequence for Hun Sen and his elites. Once the party won, Cambodia eased the tension and improved its relations with the U.S. in order to counterbalance its dependence on China and to appease domestic constituencies: the winning coalition and the opposition group. Even though this study does not establish exactly how long it takes for Cambodia to begin its rapprochement with the U.S. in post-election, it explains what causes the country to readjust its relative bandwagoning position between the U.S. and the PRC.

This pattern of behavior serves as a future reference for U.S. policymakers who seek to understand the logic of Cambodia's foreign policy. A policy recommendation for the United States is that it should tone down rhetoric regarding democracy and human rights during the Cambodian general election season, for it would help prevent unnecessary tension between the two governments, which may undo the progress made previously. The CPP will continue to be the most powerful political party in Cambodia for at least the upcoming decade or so and that the leader who comes after Hun Sen is likely to be someone from the CPP. Therefore, Washington should express its criticisms and concerns through private rather than public channel, because this

method may reduce diplomatic friction and promote a proactive response from the CPP elites who are very sensitive to real and perceived signs of inference into Cambodia's internal affairs by foreign powers, namely, the United States. Private diplomacy may pave the way for a candid engagement and cement mutual trust between Washington and Phnom Penh.

Another takeaway is that the United States should continue to engage Cambodia even when it distances itself from Washington during election time in order to retain its diplomatic influence and to offset the growing presence of the PRC. Public diplomacy programs such as short- and long-term scholarship opportunities, cultural exchanges, support for home-grown entrepreneurs, and educational events aimed at engaging the youth population are one aspect the United States can do to shape Cambodia's behaviors from the inside out. It is obvious that the CPP elites, who tend to favor China, dominate Cambodia's foreign policy decision-making. However, Hun Sen does not and cannot completely ignore the demands of young voters, who are the main backbone of the economy and whose support is essential for his political survival. That is why Cambodia shifts the degree of its accommodation with the United States and China every election cycle to keep both the pro-Washington and pro-Beijing camps satisfied. Likewise, civil society groups and NGOs will continue to shape Cambodian politics at the grassroots level due to their proximity to voters. The United States should continue to provide funding and technical supports for these groups so that they can effectively perform their jobs of keeping the RGC accountable, advocating for responsive public policies that answer the demands of the Cambodian people, and facilitating democratization process in the country. A vibrant and resilient community of civil society and NGOs is crucial for Cambodia and its people. A broader and more robust partnership between U.S. and Cambodian foreign policy think tanks and academic institutions should be encouraged by both governments, for it would bridge the gap and narrow cultural, language, and ideological

misunderstanding between scholars and analysts who may shape each country's diplomacy directly or indirectly. Furthermore, the United States should consider canceling the \$500 million war debt left by the Lon Nol government, which has accumulated without any settlement since the 1970s. Instead of using this debt as a political stick, the U.S. should invest the money back into Cambodia through a multiyear bilateral aid package or through social initiatives such as scholarship provision, public health program, cultural preservation, and rural community-based projects that directly benefit the people. The resolution of this debt will eliminate one of the thorniest issues plaguing contemporary U.S.-Cambodian diplomatic relations and help address the legacy of the U.S. war in Southeast Asia.

The second policy implication of this study is that Cambodia is and will continue to implement hedging in the future because this strategy serves domestic and foreign policy purposes of the ruling CPP. Domestically, hedging enables the CPP to show the Cambodian electorates that, as the incumbent party, it does everything in its power to safeguard the kingdom's independence and to steer the country away from becoming a pawn on a geopolitical chessboard. Moreover, the CPP has been able to extract economic, political, and military benefits from its relations with the U.S. and the PRC and use them to bring about social stability, economic growth, and national security for voters. More specifically, ties with the U.S. boost the CPP's legitimacy and enable it to perpetuate the illusion of liberal democracy with the presence of regular elections, a sizeable community of NGO and civil society groups, local and international press, and piecemeal governmental reforms. The CPP's message for the Cambodian voters is that as long as it remains in power, Cambodia will not deviate from hedging to align with a foreign power. As enshrined in the 1993 constitution, Cambodia's foreign policy will continue to be "permanently neutral and non-aligned." Therefore, people can rest assured and enjoy peace, stability, and prosperity.

With the external audience, hedging allows Hun Sen to use control over local democracy as leverage to manipulate the Western community and to extract legitimacy as a duly elected leader of Cambodia, who is recognized internationally. Although opposition leader Sam Rainsy poses an imminent threat to Hun Sen's power, his absence from the political arena delegitimizes the latter's false depiction of multiparty democracy in Cambodia. On his part, speaking out against the CPP triggers grave legal and political consequences for Rainsy, but it rallies pro-democracy voters such as students, factory workers, and urban middle-class households behind his agenda and raises his international profile. Therefore, Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy have engaged in politics of catch-and-release for the past two decades in order to preserve their legitimacy at home and abroad. Distracted with more essential foreign policy priorities and having no viable alternative, the United States and its allies have adapted, participating in this game in order to maintain their influence, stay relevant, and counterbalance China, which has left no stones unturned and willingly filled in the vacuum left open by the West. Hedging also enables Cambodia to maintain good relations with its neighbors in Southeast Asia and with middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, and the EU, all of which are essential economic and political partners. Finally, Cambodia can play its part in cultivating peaceful U.S.-China relations and in paving the way for ASEAN to facilitate the involvement of other regional players such as India, Australia, and Russia. These two measures will help ensure the continuity of the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region.

The lesson for U.S. policymakers here is that the dynamic of Cambodia's internal political process dictates its foreign policy choice of hedging. The country will not deviate from this foreign policy anytime soon because such a decision would be too risky for its short- and long-term security, and it would jeopardize the political survival of the CPP elites themselves. This continuation is an opportunity for the U.S. to engage Cambodia through meaningful ways other

than its current fixation on human rights and democracy issues. Advocacy for democratization abroad fits well with Washington's liberal internationalist foreign policy, in which the U.S. is, in the words of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the "indispensable nation" whose benevolent responsibility is to advocate for freedom on behalf of the oppressed. Moreover, this policy, at times, pressures the CPP to enact minor reform and to loosen its grip on political opponents. However, the rigidly hardline position on human rights is counterproductive for the United States' geopolitical interest in Cambodia because it antagonizes and alienates the CPP elites in Phnom Penh, who have the real power to decide most of the key decisions for the country, whether it is economics, social, defense, or diplomatic matters. Another drawback from this inflexibility is that it exposes the double standard applied by the United States to other autocratic regimes, whose records are practically as dismal as or even worse than Cambodia's. In contrast to strength and resolve, it shows the hypocrisy in Washington's foreign policy to ordinary Cambodian electorates, and it undermines the United States' own credibility in the region.

This, however, does not mean that the United States should adopt a hands-off approach regarding Cambodia's democracy. It should continue to speak out, but it should do so more selectively and discreetly through private channels rather than public ones. The "naming and shaming" technique has proven to be counterproductive for advancing U.S. interests in Cambodia because it pushes Phnom Penh closer to Beijing. Another thing the U.S. can do is to foster trust through either formal or informal channels with pro-reform Western-educated elements among CPP elites who want to see a more democratic Cambodia that shares warmer relations with the West. These people are second-generation CPP cadres who will eventually pick up the leadership baton from the party's old guards, and they will play preeminent roles in shaping Cambodia's foreign policy in the future.

The third policy implication has to do with the future of geopolitics and security landscape in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. As mentioned previously, Cambodia is not the only small state that hedges between the United States and China. Other ASEAN states such as Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia, for instance, are also hedging but with distinct characteristics. That is because upholding the regional balance of power, in which no one country can dominate the region alone, seems to be the ultimate purpose of states in the ASEAN bloc. This common pattern of hedging of small Southeast Asian countries is an opportunity for the United States to strengthen its economic, political, and military presence and to promote a rules-based order in Southeast Asia, one that discourages a rising China from opting for a revisionist posture, which may destabilize the region.

The United States should deepen its engagement with ASEAN bilaterally and multilaterally. Bilaterally, Washington should sustain foreign aid provision, extend access to U.S. universities to students through scholarships and exchange programs, strengthen ties between U.S. and ASEAN scholar community, invigorate the activities of the Lower Mekong Initiative, and bolster engagement with each ASEAN government on issues of shared international interests. Multilaterally, the United States should pay more attention to ASEAN and signal its support for this regional organization because an empowered, stable, and prosperous ASEAN is vital to the economic and security interests of Washington itself. One thing U.S. leaders can do is to show up more consistently at key meetings such as the U.S.-ASEAN summit, the East Asian Summit, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Participations of U.S. leaders in these forums reassure states in the regions of Washington's firm commitment and interest in Southeast Asia. As long as the PRC's economic and military power continues to grow, ASEAN members look to the United States as the most vital strategic actor, which has adequate resources to counterbalance China.

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